SPEED

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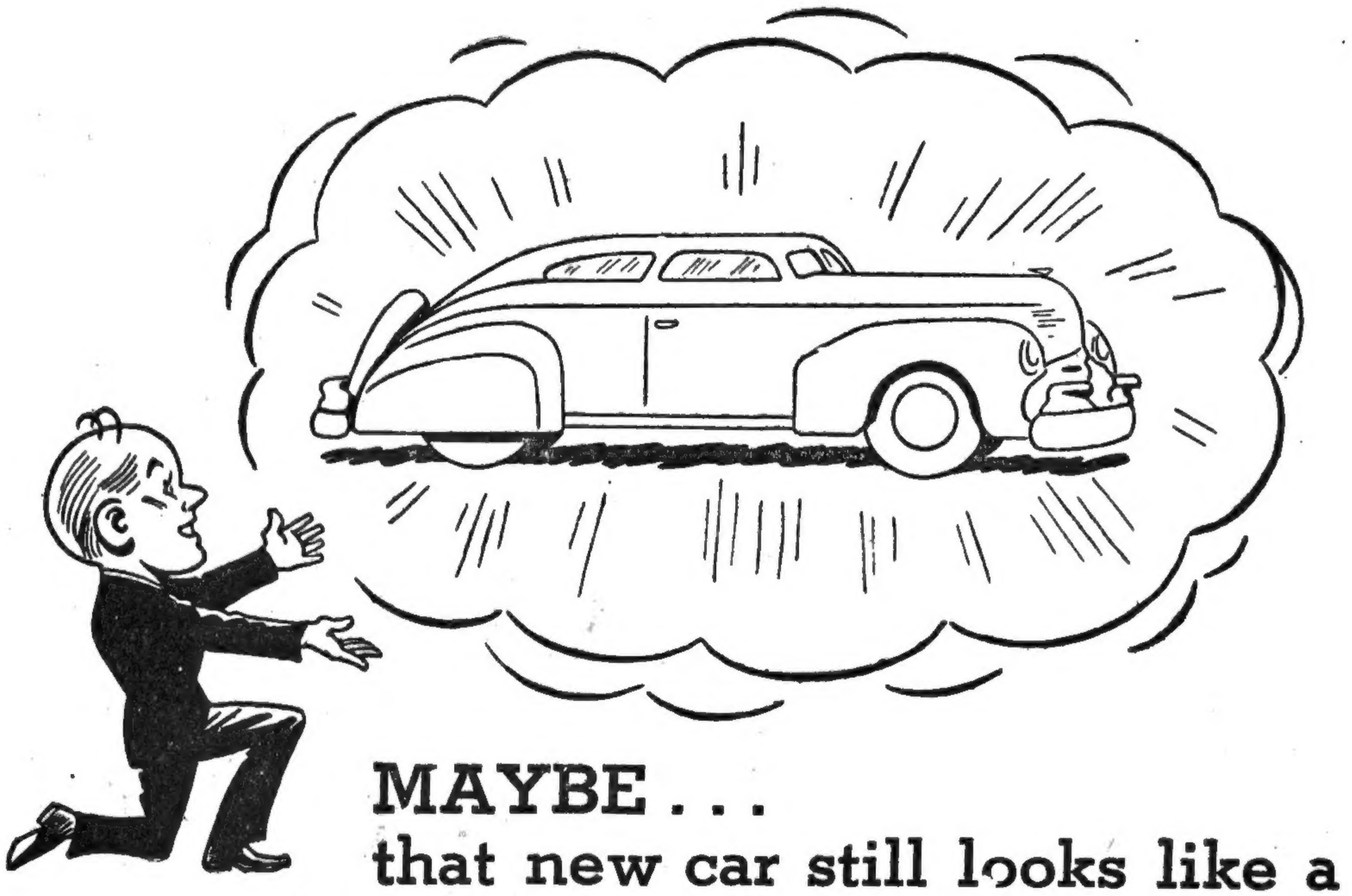
WESTERN STORIES

RAWHIDE RENEGADE

by Theodore J. Roemer



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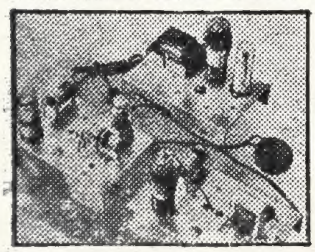

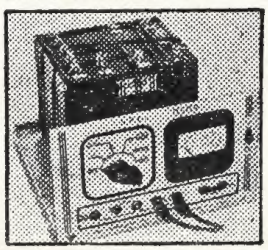

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SPEED WESTERN STORIES

October, 1947 Vol. 7, No. 5

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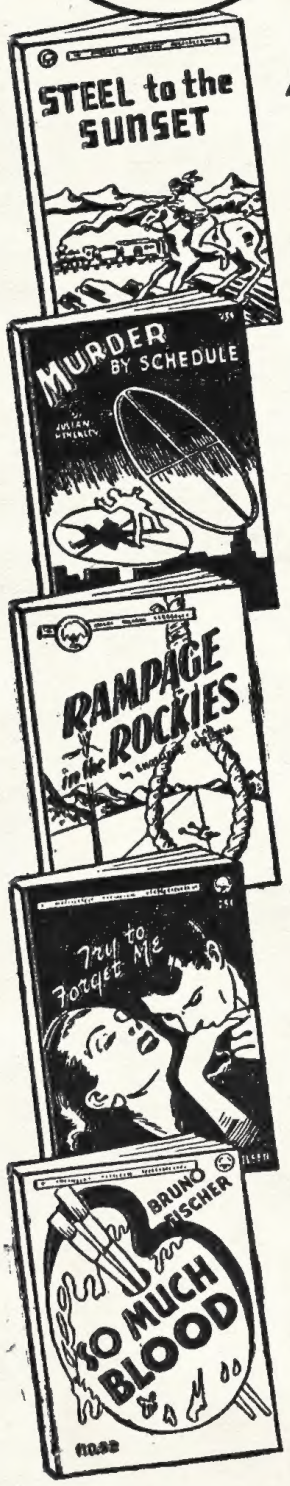

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His youth and heritage made it tough for the poky Dutchman to match the leaders of this wagon train—especially when he had such scant knowledge of this game of guns and cunning that left no recourse but to assume the life of a

Rawhide Renegade

IN the willow brush Hans Marka lifted his mouth from the stream and listened. He'd thought he'd heard a voice. But all he could hear was the water dripping from his cheeks. Had he been mistaken?

He glanced down to where his cows were drinking; they'd drawn the mud-spattered wagon into the water up to its bolsters. He looked around backward. The darkening Iowa prairie was silent.

Then, suddenly: "Let me go, Race Eider!"

Hans Marka swiftly reached the bank, went upstream. He parted the willows.

At a rock-slabbed watering place a man was holding a girl by a wrist; in the other hand the girl had a heavy cedar bucket filled with water evidently just dipped before the man had appeared.

Hans saw that the man was tall and armed and wore fringed, gaudy buck-

"Bull's-eye," Hans muttered, as he aimed at the second Indian. He missed, but took aim again.

By
THEODORE J.
ROEMER

skins. The roughly clothed Hans felt instant dislike for him. The guns looked affective; the face was a little too smooth, too handsome.

"Let me go!" the girl said again, but the man laughed.

Hans stiffened to charge across the stream. But suddenly he discerned more anger than fright in her voice and he waited. There was a wiry strength to this girl. That dark red hair showed fire. Maybe she didn't need any outside help. Hans was not afraid but rather cautious where the business of others was concerned. He waited.

The girl didn't need any help. In a flash she twisted, whirled her held arm and was free. But she was not satisfied with that. Without loss of movement she swung the heavy cedar bucket. The next instant cold spring water drenched the gaudy scout from shoulders to boots.

"'There! Maybe that'll cool you off.' She turned and darted into the grove where campfires were winking between the trees. And the man stared.

Hans came erect. He wanted to hoot. He wanted to roar with laughter. Angry red waves streaked across the man's face. The brown, bright eyes grew brighter. The little black mustache, which curled up at the corners of his mouth like the tail feathers of a drake, twitched and wouldn't lie still.

Hans put his wide young hands to his belly to hold his mirth. The sissified dandy, the skunk, had gotten what he deserved.

Hans' foot slipped suddenly. His boot made a loud splash.

An instant of silence, then the man whirled. "Who's there?" His voice was low.

Hans stood motionless. He saw all previous anger was suddenly gone from the man's smooth, hawked face, and a new look had come into it—a bright, dangerous look, chiefly in the eyes.

"Damn you!" It was a snarl now, a soft snarl. "Who's there?"

Then Hans saw the man had his right gun out. He was pointing it. And suddenly Hans realized those guns weren't for show-off! The man was very well accustomed to them.

HANS never had had a gun pointed at him in his life. In fact, he'd seldom shot even so small a rifle as a .22. He was of peace-loving, cautious, stubborn Pennsylvania Dutch folk whose closest approach to fighting was a friendly wrestling bout among the young men Sunday afternoons. Hans had thought long before taking this trek west to find a farm. His father had planned with him and given advice besides helping his adventurous oldest son with gifts of a plough, an axe and other necessary tools. Thus Hans was prepared to face a great deal, crossing the plains with a caravan he hoped would take him on here at the Grove, of which he'd heard. But to have a gun pointed at him—! And by a man whose bold eyes were uncommonly bright and whose hawked cheeks had a dull, red wash clean to the bone! Hans in that moment knew this Race Eider had killed other men before.

It wasn't exactly fear that touched Hans' heart; it was something of shock and calculation, and a growing, slow anger. He was aware of the stillness over the creek brush, then of geese on the wing above, their organlike sounds, the prairie wind in the willow tops. The spring twilight deepened. He swallowed. Could the man see him?

"Damn you!" The man spoke, quick and harsh now. "Come out or I'll drill you!"

Hans was about to step out when heavy running feet came out of the Grove. "Race! Race!" a gruff voice called. "Where the hell you been? Them sodbusters are linin' up to vote fer Painter!"

The tall man whirled. His smooth face was vicious now. "Shut up! Circle the bushes an' roust out who's in there."

Hans caught a glimpse of two bearded wagoners. One was stocky, black-bearded; the other of lighter visage and taller.

Through the dusk and his thin screen he saw two men look with distaste at the morass of mud and reeds. "Shucks, boss," the shorter man said. "There ain't nobody in there. We saw some oxen from above was all."

At that moment one of Hans' cows blew noisily into the water. Race Eider's gun-hand slackened visibly, then he rammed the weapon into its holster. The snarl didn't leave hiis face but he turned to the two, vaguely satisfied tha' there were only animals in the willows.

"What the hell you want? Bellowing like fools after me. What is it, Blackie?"

The stocky wagoner said, "The homesteaders must have got wind we're going to elect you captain of the train. They're banding together to elect Painter."

What difference does it make?" Eider snapped. "We outnumber them!"

"I counted the new settlers. It'll be close and—" The man paused and glanced

at his partner. "Shall I tell him, Swede?"

"Tell me what?"

The bullnecked Swede spoke for the first time. "Blackie an' I took a squint into them three wagons of Painter's—the gal was gone an' we took a chance. Painter hasn't trade stuff in 'em! He has rifles, hundred of 'em!"

Eider's neck purpled. He made a choking sound. "Do you fools want to spoil everything? I told you he had a special reason for hiring a big crew like us. Those rifles will be worth a hundred dollars apiece on the Pacific coast! And double that where we can sell them! And you fools risk suspicion by prying around."

Blackie muttered surlily: "The girl was gone and we wanted to be sure it'd be worth the chips headin' two or three weeks across them damn prairies riding herd on them dumb sodbusters."

Eider swore. "I ought to bash in your brains! If Painter got the least suspicious—" He broke off. Then he said curtly, "Tell every man to be at the voting tonight! If he isn't there, I take him in hand personally. If I win the captaincy of the train it'll make our job so much easier. And stay away from Painter's wagons!" He moved angrily into the grove, stamping in his wet boots.

When his tall figure disappeared into the gloom, the Swede spat. "Yah! Making a fool of himself! That red-headed girl—" The bullnecked wagoner spat again in disgust.

Blackie, however, was thoughtful. "A smart little filly all right. She might be able to wrap Eider, or any man she's a mind to, right around her little finger. An' if she picks Race Eider, we might be able to make a deal. Race ain't too smart. . .in some ways." He grinned through his broken teeth and led the way toward the camp.

Hans stood still. Water crept into his boots; he didn't feel it. A cool prairie wind sprang up and eddied the smoke of the winking fires down upon him. And overhead the sounds of the geese still came as the rush of Spring grew strong in the wet, cool night. But the stolid Dutch youth felt none of this. He struggled to decide if he wanted a part of this train. His pa had always preached against fighting. And yet he'd been looking for a caravan to tie to. He scrubbed a calloused hand against his cheek and his baby-blue eyes frowned.

The wagoners had said. "—the girl was center. Mostly men were around the one they meant. She was Painter's daughter, and Painter had three wagon-loads of guns, and these fellows—

He strode to his team, "Gee-up!" he shouted. He headed across the creek toward the campfires.

A WHEEZY, nasal voice hailed him. "Hold up, stranger. Kinda dark to be rammin' around loose, ain't it?"

Hans stopped before the campfire. It was the first one of dozens in a great, irregular circle. A large one was in the center. Mostly men around that one—

—roughly clothed men.

"Who's heading this outfit?" Hans asked of the man sprawling by a stump, smoking.

"Where's your folks?"

Hans bit his lip. He knew he looked like a kid. All along the line people had thought him a youngster, even the men who'd traded him the four cows and $50 to boot for his sorrel horses; they'd thought they had slickered him. Hans knew better. Cows gave milk; ate on the way; pulled almost as well; and they'd be a start for a herd.

But now suddenly he was angered by it. He wanted to be taken for a man. The sight of that red-headed girl had done it.

He snapped his yellow suspenders hard against his thick chest and breathed deeply, filling the red Cardigan-wool shirt he was wearing. He said coldly, "I'm my own boss. Who's heading this?"

"Well, I swan." The man took the cob pipe from his snaggled teeth, then he saw Hans' draft animals. "Cows! By the holy, Sarah. Look! He's driving cows instead of mules or oxen!"

The woman glanced. Hans decided he'd never seen a more tired-looking creature.

Then she looked at Hans. She said through the man's guffawing. "Shut your big mouth, Ed. He looks like he knows what he's doing, which is more'n you ever did."

"Tend to your cooking, woman." The man scowled, because others, drawn by his laughter, had heard her words.

Hans looked around at them. He saw a bulky man with crisp black beard. "Who's heading this train?"

The man said, "Ruther Painter is in charge so far. We're having an election tonight. Everybody can vote who signs up. It costs twenty-five dollars."

Hans' Dutch caution crept forth. "That's a lot of money."

"It goes to pay Race Eider and his bullwhackers for scout protection."

"I came all the way across the Iowa prairies alone, without protection."

The garrulous man on the ground cackled. "The sprout thinks Iowa is the plains, Wyoming, the Sioux passes. Did you ever hear of the Sioux? The Comanches? The Utes?." He cackled again. Hans looked at him, and felt his dislike increase. The man was more than lazy and garrulous; he had shifty eyes. Hans turned to the black-jawed man who pointed out to him a preacher-appearing fellow in black frock-coat and iron-grey beard. The man said: "There's Painter."

"Thanks," Hans said. He drove his wagon around the camp circle; he didn't want Race Eider to see him coming from the creek.

Halfway around he saw three big Conestogas pulled together and he knew they were Painter's wagons. He saw Painter at that moment leave the central fire and come toward them. Hans left his wagon and stepped forward.

"I'd like to join the train, Mr. Painter."

The tall, spare man whirled in surprise, and then, like the garrulous man, he stared. In a deep voice he said, "Where's your folks?"

Hans grimaced. Again his youthful appearance. He explained his situation quietly, aware that a flap on the nearest wagon had opened and the girl looked down at them. Hans held out twenty-five dollars, which he had, with his Dutch caution, counted from his money belt, back in the woods. "Here is my fee."

The man scowled, muttering something about "kids," when the girl's voice came. "If he's got the fee, Father, and heading his own outfit, you have no right to turn him down. He'll be as good as that lazy Ed Waller, at least." She emphasized the last words.

"At least." Hans was surprised at himself that his stolid Dutch should say that, putting mockery into the words, but the quick thrill at hearing her low voice again was dispelled by the comparison. She, too, thought him young for this kind of adventure. He looked boldly up at her. She met his stare, then slowly a flush crept up her slender neck.

Hans said, "Some people need help at times, don't they, miss?" His eyes flicked toward the spring.

She caught it. Her flush mounted, then her lips came together sharply. She withdrew into the wagon and pulled down the canvas flap hard.

Ruther Painter took the twenty-five dollars, wrote Hans' name in a worn, paper-bound book and growled, "Camp anywhere! We're pulling out in the morning."

HANS made camp on the bluff-side where the wind blew away the mosquitoes. He was just bringing his coffee to a boil when a twig cracked behind him in the shadows. He turned, thoughts still on that gun which had been in Race Eider's hand. The girl stood there.

"Hello" he said. He felt an inner confusion then. She was here, alone. Obviously she had come to see him. Hans Marka wasn't accustomed to such things. The Pennsylvania Dutch girls were utterly different, and suddenly he realized this girl, who couldn't be much over seventeen, was older than himself. Not in years but—well, having been places. She was the daughter of a trader. And he was only a pokey Dutchman. The thought made him angry. He forgot his sense of embarrassment.

"Hello!" He said it gruffly this time, and then she stepped into the firelight.

"Did you see Race Eider and me at the spring?" She asked it quietly, bluntly.

Hans felt himself coloring. Fire played in her up-brushed hair. She had on a brown, full skirt and tight, flowered bodice that did something to her lithe, girlish figure. She was a woman! Her lips were round and red, her cheeks smooth. Her arms, bare to the elbows, were strong and tanned. But it was this straight-forward talk, by a beautiful girl who didn't blush as she said it, that abashed him. Was there even cool mockery in those brown eyes?

He said, "Yes."

"I thought I saw a wagon there when I ran off. You're driving cows. I just came to tell you that if Race Eider ever finds out you saw what happened he'll kill you."

Hans Marka slowly bent forward and moved the coffee pot. The jaw muscles knotted under his skin.

"I reckon," he said slowly, "when a man gets to be twenty, and saved enough money to buy a wagon and tools and horses by doing his own farming for three years, he isn't too much afraid of—"

He stopped. He had the feeling he was alone. He lifted his eyes and his feeling was correct. The girl was gone.

The bucket of water drenched him from shoulders to boots.

CHAPTER II

Danger Ahead

THE *chuck-chuck* of wagon wheels on their well-greased skeins had been in his ears all day, and he was weary with a bone-deep weariness. When he flung his bedroll under the wagon he thought, *the election won't take place for an hour yet; I'll lie down for a minute,* and he lay down and closed his eyes. He fell asleep.

The slight creaking of his wagon overhead awakened him. For a moment he thought someone was prowling through it, then in the big moon over the river he saw men's legs not two feet from his hand, and he knew two men had paused in the darkness to lean against his wagon and talk. They'd evidently just come up from the river, scouting the ford; they were talking about it.

Hans was about to crawl to his feet when one of the men said: "Race is pretty cute, aiming on getting elected captain of the train too. We buck against him, demand them to shell out; he tries to keep us in line—" The speaker paused as if shrugging his shoulders. "After the shakedown we go on, and Race is still in

good with Painter and the girl and the train. The next crossing we shake the sodbusters down again. . . .shell out or be left on this side of the river! Cute, ain't it?"

Hans had stiffened; he recognized the voices of the two wagoners, Blackie and Swede! They had talked to Race Eider at the spring.

Blackie's chuckling voice went on, unpleasantly: "Race's plan is to get across the Elkhorn, Cedar and Calamus before we pull the first shakedown. They won't be so apt to back down if they have to back-cross them streams alone. We'll milk them at The Loupe again, and then at the North Platte once more. At The Forks is the payoff.

"He's planning to get rid of Painter there?"

"Not so loud, Swede. That's the plan. Race has his eyes on the rifles, too. We c'n use the rifles ourselves." Blackie's unpleasant laugh sounded again.

The Swede grunted.

Blackie said sharply: "C'mon, I see they're fixing for the election. We got to vote Race in as captain." The two wagoners moved away.

The Dutch youth watched them. Their rolling, hulking frames bulked against the moon like shapeless apes. They were dark and sinister. Then Hans Marka rolled from his blankets with a catlike movement and shaking the sleep from his tousled yellow-haired head, he skirted the camp in the blackness and came in on the other side, heading toward the huge chuckwagon fire in the center. He was going to try to see that Race Eider was *not* to be captain.

An excited knot milled about the tail-gate of a huge Murphy wagon. Leathery, suspendered homesteaders pushed their gaunt faces between the circled bull-whackers. It was easy to tell the horny handed men of the plough and furrow from the Westerners; the latter invariably had some talisman portraying his craft. One had a huge bull-shag coiled and tucked into his belt. Another, in his heavy cowhide boots, had a bowie knife, its ebony handle glistening with use. Another had a wide cowhide belt studded with brass rivets. Guns, knives, leather vests, heavy wide paunches—hard men. They were men of the trail, who knew both ends and stared hard at you with no show of friendliness.

THE HOMESTEADERS were just that—plain dirt farmers wearing homespun, flat-heeled low boots, blue denims with bib and crossed shoulder straps. Hans saw one of them—the crisp-bearded man—standing to one side, chewing a straw. His black eyes looked worried. Somehow Hans felt friendly to the man.

Hans slowed his steps at the outer ring. He saw Ruther Painter at the open tail-gate. Painter had a stub pencil in his hand and his black soft hat was crushed back on his grey, leonine head. He was laboriously reading and counting pieces of dirty paper as he drew them from a wooden butter bowl, and in heavy tones he read the names and Waller, with his bent thin nose close to Painter's book, wrote down the vote count: "Painter, Eider, Painter—

The last slip was read. Painter upturned the wooden butter bowl. "How do they total?"

Waller's shifty eyes came up, blank with astonishment. "Damn! Jest twenty-two apiece."

A murmur went over the knotted crowd. Scowls appeared on some of the bullwhackers' faces. Painter, who looked a little pale at the outcome, he raised his hand.

"Has everyone voted? Every grown man?"

Silence grew over the assembly. Then Race Eider's oil-smooth voice broke the stillness. "I reckon he has, Ruther. Put your arm up on this tail-gate against mine. First man whose hand gets pushed flat to the board loses the election."

He stepped forward, his men making way for their leader, grinning, and Race Eider, tall, powerful, smiling with his black eyes and rather small smooth face, put his buckskin arm on the tail-gate.

But a hard voice spoke from the back-

ground. "That isn't fair. Eider, you've got twenty years on our man." It was the black-bearded homesteader.

Eider's eyes lost their smile. "This train needs a tough wagon boss, Buckmaster. May the best man win." At which the bullwhackers gave applause and crowded the homesteader back, then faced the hesitant trader. "Go on, Painter! Yuh aren't a-scaird, are yuh? You outweigh Race twenty pounds!"

The trader chewed a strand of his greying beard. He said, "I am surprised at you men. I . . . or we . . . hired Mr. Eider as scout to head the bullwhackers and protect the train against Indians or anything that could befall us, but now you want him for wagon master also. As owner of the most wagons I thought it natural that I would be named as captain of the train to decide all matters that would arise. But, if you wish it this way—" He stripped his frock coat and stepped forward. There were lines of puzzlement and some worry about the man's deepset eyes.

"Wait!" It was Buckmaster's gravel voice again. "There is a man who hasn't voted." He pointed across the circle to Hans, who had been trying to elbow his way in. I saw him pay up to Painter tonight. He's driving his own wagon."

The men turned. Then the wagoner, Blackie, said, "Hell, Buckmaster, he ain't even of voting age." And the other bullwhackers laughed.

Hans walked to the center, before Eider and Painter, and he said quietly, facing Blackie. "I believe I have a right to vote. I own my own wagon and have paid my twenty-five dollars." He raised his voice. "I cast my vote for Ruther Painter!"

THERE was stillness. The dull red wash, which Hans had seen in Race Eider's face at the spring, was now coming back into the man's olive-smooth cheeks. Hans kept his eyes on the face. The little eyes grew small, intense. Eider stared hard at the Dutchman.

"Who the hell are you?" he grated.

Hans had once had a rattlesnake strike his boot. He now stared into the man's eyes and he had the same feeling he'd had when he'd looked into that snake's eyes before he'd smashed the reptile with the whiffletree he had been carrying. That was back in Pennsylvania. Here in the West, a snake was a snake also, and Hans suddenly had the feeling he should grab up a whiffletree from the wagon tongue at his feet and smash Race Eider also.

But instead he said quietly. "My name is Hans Marka, if that makes any difference in the voting."

The youth's quietness, his steady look, made Eider's eyes narrow and the look in their sultry depths intensified.

Painter's voice broke the tenseness, "He's qualified, Race, so I guess that decides it."

Eider's back was toward the trader and Painter didn't see the look in the scout's eyes.

Painter turned to the men, his shoulders straightening. "Tomorrow at dawn we cross the river and strike out. Every man be to his job. Now get your sleep."

The homesteaders gave a shout and started to disperse, but the bullwhackers muttered under their breaths, and Hans, who hadn't taken his eyes off Race Eider's face, saw the man single out someone behind Hans. A signal passed.

Men were moving about Hans now. Some were homesteaders, happy and talking, going back to their wagons and families, now that the excitement of the evening was over, then someone jostled Hans. Instinctively, he knew that it was no homesteader and he turned, the hair on his neck rising. Blackie faced him.

Hans said nothing. He backed away.

Then somebody jolted him from the right. He spun and the Swede was there. The misshapen-faced man spilled an oath.

"Look where you're going, feller!"

This was it, Hans thought.

He pulled his thick shoulder muscles up. He waited. His big, square hands were strangely lax.

He was no fist-fighter but he and his brothers had done plenty of wrestling.

"I *am* looking where I'm going," he said softly.

"Cursing me now!" The Swede bellowed it and the entire camp turned. "I'll learn you something!" he snarled and struck.

Hans stepped back. The blow missed. Real anger flamed in the Swede's nose-flattened, whitish face. It blotched with inner fury. "A smart one, huh! A damned trouble-souser. I'll beat the kinks outta you! Afore this train begins to roll I'll—" His snarl boomed into thunder. He bulled for Hans, his great arms extended like rigid claws.

The entire camp had turned in stunned amazement. A fight? They saw the young man, then his opponent. Stillness gripped the men. Some of the sodbusters began running forward. But the wagoner struck.

Then something happened—so swiftly, so easily, that the watchers couldn't follow with their eyes. The boy got a hold on the man, on one of those swinging fists. The boy whirled. A square shoulder came jolting out of nowhere, a solid back arched and kicked up like a mule striking. The wagoner screamed in rage, then catapulted like a rimless wheel into the blackness beyond the fire.

He struck the trunk of an oak. A grunt and the man fell senseless to the ground.

Hans turned, breathing easily. He knew hitting that oak trunk had been a lucky and easy end to the fight. Now if—

A stunning blow on his neck whirled him. Blackie, he thought dimly—and instinctively tried to grapple. Another blow came from the night. The blackness was pain-streaked, red. He crouched and whirled. Blackie, with an iron-bound whiffletree, was on him.

Another blow, a fourth, and Hans felt himself sagging. Then a third body hit and a gravel voice said harshly, "Lay off, you polecat devil! You want to kill him?" And Hans knew Buckmaster had flung himself into the fray.

He looked up. Buckmaster had the club now, was swinging it on Blackie, but Race Eider ran forward and twisted it away. "That's my man, Buckmaster. I don't want him clubbed."

"How about the lad?" Buckmaster retorted hotly.

"He started it. He got what he deserved."

Hans crawled to his feet. His white skin poured some blood on his cheeks. The whiffletree had cut a jagged line across his forehead. His Cardigan-wool shirt was ripped from shoulder to shoulder.

Dazed, he stared at Eider, trying to say something.

Then Ruther Painter was between the fighters. "Stop it!" he commanded. "We don't want any fights before we even begin." He turned to Hans. "So you're a fighter and trouble-maker, are you? Well, we'll certainly take care of you. Go to your wagon and don't stir up anything else. We'll see you in the morning." His voice ended with a hard snap, then Hans, sick, dazed, and unable to talk and defend himself, turned and stumbled into the darkness to his wagon.

IN the cold dawn he awoke with the camp and packed up. There was a cold mist and fires burned fitfully. Hans stiffly cooked breakfast, yoked his cows, and kept watching for Ruther Painter. There was dull anger in his heart. He hadn't started that ruckus last night. Race Eider had. But Painter was afraid of Race Eider for some reason, Hans saw. Painter wouldn't see Hans' side of the argument. The Dutch youth watched the big camp.

He saw the girl packing utensils into one of the Conestogas and she glanced his way often but didn't come over. Maybe she too was afraid, he thought bitterly. And the homesteaders, before the trace was even begun, had showed they were sheep, with the exception of the man called Buckmaster. What kind of a trek was this going to be?

Then he saw them coming—Painter, Eider, Ed Waller, Buckmaster and several others. Eider and Painter were in the lead. An easy smile on Eider's small face.

They halted before Hans' weather-stained and ragged-canvassed wagon, and Painter said coldly, "We've talked you over, Marka. Buckmaster insists you have the right to go along, if you wish to stick, and we're leaving it up to you. But frankly I don't want you. You're a trouble-maker."

Hans looked at him. "Did you see the ruckus last night?"

"Some of it."

"Did you see it start?"

"What difference does that make?" Eider drawled. "Blackie and Swede both swear you started it."

Hans turned to Buckmaster. "Did you see me start anything?"

The homesteader grimaced. "I missed the first half, youngster. But I sure saw the wind-up." And he grinned. "Where'd you learn that throw?"

Hans didn't answer him. He turned back to Painter. "I'm sticking." His Dutch jaw was set.

"You'll mean trouble—all the way," Painter said. "Those bullwhackers won't forget this."

"Wait a minute," Hans said. "What

The wagoner screamed in rage as he struck the oak trunk.

are you afraid of? If you think one fight throws a man out of this train, you won't have a driver left when you hit Fort Bridger. It takes fighting men to get across those Plains, across The Loupe, the North Platte up to The Forks. And I'm sticking past every one of those places!"

His eyes travelled to Race Eider's face. Eider was watching him strangely as each of those crossings was named. Then the look was covered by the man's oily lids.

He stared at Hans and drawled, "How long do you think you can keep up with us, using those cows?"

"They walk faster than oxen," Hans said.

"Maybe, for a while. What if you get stuck?"

"They can pull my wagon out. I've been stuck plenty."

Painter cut in exasperatedly, "What are you looking for? Farm land? It's all around you. Driving cattle to market in Oregon? Or California? There's a good market right here! Gold? Then you're foolish to drag that plough along. What are you looking for?

Hans' stubborn jaw was set. He let his blue eyes drift from the men across the camp to where the girl was packing and watching them, and he said slowly, "What I'm looking for is what most all of you are looking for—something better, something different, a life that we like and people we like. My pa gave me a talking to before I left and that's what he said. He struck it on the head, I reckon."

The simple direct speech hit home. Ruther Painter stared. Ed Waller gulped noisily and the other settlers nodded in silence. Race alone seemed unaffected. He sneered.

"If Painter lets you drag, it's all right by me, as he's wagon boss now, but don't look to any bullwhackers or to me for help if you break down or something happens."

Hans said evenly, "I'll watch to see that nothing happens."

Again Eider stared, then turned on his heel. The smile wasn't pleasant on Hans' face either.

They put Hans last in the train where the dust was but he took it with Dutch patience. Someone had to be last, he figured. But as he looked ahead at the long, winding caravan of white-topped wagons he wished he could be up closer to the lead and Julee Painter in the huge Conestogas. When he had told Painter and the delegation why he was coming along he had wanted to say he was looking for a wife, but he hadn't and now he knew it was a good thing he hadn't. For many reasons. And not the least was that it would get back to Julie Painter.

He had gotten a good look at her as they'd ferried the river in bright dawn. She was prettier even than in the yellow glow of a campfire. In the sunlight her hair gave out myriad gleams of dark red fire. With her slim neck and lithe figure she captivated his Dutch stolidity and eye, accustomed to heavier slower girls. Her vivacity and helpful drive were new wonders to him.

He sat up. His cows had stopped. They'd halted and the lead cows were slackening off the trace to catch up toothsome bites of woolly pussblossoms.

"Gee-up!" Hans shouted. It was just the thing Race Eider wanted—him to fall behind, get out of the train, lost, anything. And suddenly Hans wished he'd kept his big mouth shut about The Loupe, and the North Platte and The Forks. Now Eider had an inkling that somehow the Dutchman had wormed into their plans.

CHAPTER III

Renegade Outcast

ALL MORNING the Painter train snaked over the hills and crawled around the ridge tops while the wind blew the great green sea of prairie, and the clouds came walking with their black shadows over the stately hills. And birds sang and the skyways were harrowed by the wedged wild geese. And in the beauty of this wild freedom Hans forgot

about Race Eider and the blackness of last evening, until his cows almost ran into the wagon ahead and then he stopped them abruptly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Something up there," Ed Waller said. "They all stopped and I stopped." And he sank back into his spring seat with lazy indifference.

Hans clambered down and passed the Waller vehicle, which was practically in the last stages of despair. He heard the Waller woman cough inside the ragged canvas enclosure, then he was past, hurrying up the long line of wagons.

Men and women and bullwhackers watched him go past. He was known throughout the train already. The ragged, unclean drivers had only glowers for him, but some of the settlers grinned and nodded. And two girls in gingham seated on a tarp waved but the Dutch youth strode on.

He came to the lead. It was the first of Painter's Conestoga wagons, and it was up to its hubcaps in a slough of black mud. The oxen, up to their bellies in the churned morass, knew they were hopelessly mired; they just lay there grunting, while Swede and Blackie and other bullwhackers plied the merciless bull-shags.

Hans gave a shout and pushed through the circle of swearing, willowing, mud-spattered men. "Who ever pointed the trace across this swale?" It was obviously soft ahead; the ridge kept a hard bright green to the right although it was miles around. Someone had tried a short-cut.

Blackie came up out of the mud.

"Oh, it's you again!"

The flat-nosed Swede let loose a mud-caked wheel and swore. He started to wallow forward. "I'll get you this time."

Hans stood his ground. Then Painter, worriedly, appeared around the wagon. "No more fighting. Get back at that wheel." He bent a stern glance at Hans. "Get back to your wagon. And keep your mouth shut."

Hans turned to Buckmaster. "Who ordered this short-cut?"

The settler started to answer when Race Eider pushed forward on his fine black gelding. "I did. Got anything to say about it?" His small brown eyes were pin-pointed.

Hans looked up at him, hands on hips. And again the feeling swept him that someday he'd have to meet this man in a fight. But here was not the place.

He said, tersely: "Light green willow growth like that always means soft spots." His weeks crossing the Iowa prairie had taught him many things.

Eider turned his back. He said to Painter, "We'll have to unload."

"No!" the trader said sharply.

Hans glanced at the trader. So that was it. He was worried about his guns. He didn't want the train to know he had guns in his wagons. Then Hans saw he suspected Race Eider of knowing already. That was why he was fearful of Eider back at camp last night when Eider almost got the captaincy. He saw where the power of the wagon train was—Race Eider at the lead of the bullwhackers!

HANS glanced at the mired wagon. Settlers stepped aside, and Hans moved forward. "Unhitch those oxen. Get them out of there. They can't pull from there." His voice was sharp.

"Go tend to your knitting, cow-driver," one of the drivers said.

Hans ignored him. He pushed into the mud and did the chore himself, leading the fighting oxen to solid ground. "Get chains or long ropes. Make a hitch out here for them. Another span or two from that other wagon won't hurt." He barked the orders.

Painter came forward, scowling. "Do you know what you're doing, young man?"

Hans said, "I got stuck once crossing Iowa like this. I got out alone—and I didn't get into such a mess again." He gave Eider and his bullwhackers a meaning glance. Hans felt himself growing.

Race Eider strode forward. "He'll just pull you in deeper, Painter. Those wheels won't hold up in that ooze. Your wagon will go right down to the bottom of that

sinkhole. Unload."

Hans ignored him. He turned to the gaping settlers, confident, "Get scythes, or even your sheath knives will do. Get out there and cut that long dead grass. It's tougher than rope when twisted together. Get a lot of it and twist it around the wheels."

The settlers stared, then Buckmaster said, "By gosh, it might work," He led the men forward, yanking out his belt knife.

They wrapped the wheels, big and wide. Two more yoke of oxen were chained to the original ones. Hans snatched a shag from a bullwhacker's hand and stepped forward. "All right, men. Get at those wheels and tailgate." He swung the shag. *"HUP!"* It exploded like a rifle shot over the oxen's ears.

They leaned into yokes, moved forward, stopped. *"HUP!"*

The oxen strained forward and the wagon began to crawl. Mud quaked before the wheels. It piled high, broke away. "Hup! Hup!" Hans shouted at the oxen, and plied the shag.

Men slipped and shoved in the mud and slowly the huge, heavily laden Conestoga came steadily toward solid ground, moving like a ship slipping its moorings from a sea of green jelly.

The wheels came to prairie sod again. Hans tossed the shag to a driver. "Those other wagons will come out all right if you don't cramp the wheels." He scraped the mud off his boots with phlaris grass and started back to his wagon. He was a man!

As he passed the third Painter wagon he saw the girl. She had been sitting on the boot, watching him. She was about to say something to him but she closed her lips. Race Eider was striding toward Hans. He had dismounted. His small, weazel-like head with brown face was dark with suppressed rage. Hans smiled, stopped, but Eider grasped his arm and propelled him past the wagon.

Eider grated: "You're stepping out of line too often! Keep to your wagon."

Hans saw the girl looking around the schooner's canvas. Hans pulled his arm coolly from Eider's grasp. "Why did you want to unload the wagons? You drove in there on purpose."

Hazel lights flowed through Eider's eyes. "Keep to your wagon, Marka," he said softly. He turned and strode away.

HANS had three visitors at his camp that night. He was milking his cows in the dusk when the first one came—Race Eider. The man sat his black horse, wearing his two guns, and watched Hans at the menial chore in silence. It was obvious he had come to speak about something, and Hans guessed it was about Hans mentioning The Loupe, the Platte and The Forks. But then Eider turned his horse and rode curtly away. Eider also knew a fight was impending.

Hans knew it. Why Eider had come this night he didn't know. The scene had been a strange one. Hans' thoughts ran on. He had won his place this day, but—fight Eider? How? The man was sure death with a gun. And you couldn't grapple with him; he wasn't a fist-fighter. But Hans knew he had to fight him, pound him to nothing, beat him into unconsciousness. And he had to do it before the entire camp. And probably—Hans didn't like the thought—one of them would die.

The prairie chickens were giving forth in the evening dust with their wild and intense and almost insane chorus when Hans got back to his wagon. A shadow detached itself from the vehicle. The man was Dulles Buckmaster, his second visitor.

"You made yourself a lot of enemies today showing up Eider and his bullwhackers."

"I made them before." Hans smiled, remembering last night.

The chunky family man didn't smile. "I heard Blackie talking at the chuck fire. He and Swede are to get you—on Eider's orders."

"How?"

Buckmaster shook his head. "I don't know. They are to get rid of you." The man reached inside his homespun shirt and drew forth a Walker .44 Dragoon.

"I have two of these. I'm giving ou one."

Hans said, "I've never shot a revolver. Keep it."

Buckmaster tossed it onto the grass by the wheel. "You'll need it." He dropped a handful of bullets and strode quickly away toward the main body of wagons, as of afraid to be seen.

And Hans thought: "Already Eider has put the fear of his guns over the camp, even into Buckmaster's heart." He looked at the gun and let it lie.

His third visitor didn't come directly to his camp. Hans was kneading bread, the old-fashioned salt-rising bread his mother had taught him how to make years ago. He needed more water. Going to the creek, he was surprised to find Julee Painter there bathing her feet.

She smiled. "I was hoping you'd come down." And went on washing her feet, unabashed.

The Dutch youth suppressed his embarrassment and looked at the screening poplars and willows toward the big camp. "You didn't want to be seen coming down here?" he guessed.

"That's right." Then the smile left her face. "Do you fear Race Eider?" she asked bluntly.

He looked at her. "No," he said finally. "Why?"

"In the three days this train has been forming there isn't a settler here who doesn't fear him."

"Your father?" Hans asked.

"Father has everything he owns invested in those—" She bit her lip stopping the words.

"Those rifles," he completed it for her.

Her eyes widened. He went on, "I overheard much last night. Go on, please."

She looked at him, astonishment in her pretty eyes. "And yet you came with this train."

"There are other reasons. Go on."

AND then she told him about how her father had hired Eider and, after he had done so, he began to fear. Her father got to know the man. He saw the crew Eider gathered about him. "He is afraid for his investment, and not of Indians now."

He heard a scream behind him as he hit the water.

"Why doesn't he turn back, then?" Hans asked.

"He hinted to do so. Race Eider laughed, but his eyes told Father plenty. Have you ever seen his eyes? Close? They are brown and darting, as when a dog scents game. When he comes near me—" The girl stopped.

Hans saw her trembling. And suddenly he put out his hand for her shoulder, but before he could touch it there was a shout from the darkness up-camp. Then many cries. There was alarm in them. The two looked at each other, then turned and ran up, the girl running barefooted.

They came to a circle of men and women around a near fire. A man was lying on the ground; his head was covered with blood. A jagged gash had laid open his forehead.

The girl whispered, "Buckmaster!"

Hans knelt down. Buckmaster was still breathing. "How'd it happen?" Hans asked a settler.

"I dunno. I found him over near Orlando's mules."

Hans' mind raced swiftly. Buckmaster had just come from his wagon; he had been stealthy about coming—and going—and yet somebody had watched him.

Just as, maybe, others were being watched. Was this Eider's work, or the scheme of the other two blacklegs? He guessed Eider's.

Hans said, "It doesn't look like a mule's kick to me. More like the iron end of one of those wiffletrees."

An easy tread near the fire. The settlers looked up, then down quickly. One said, quite loudly, "It was a mule! See those marks."

Hans looked around. Race Eider stood there, hands resting lightly on his guns. But his eyes were on Julee Painter, barefooted. He said, almost in a silky whisper. "Be careful you don't catch cold going far that way." He left them.

RACE EIDER had the camp in his grip. As the days wore on it became only too evident. The bullwhackers, drinking freely, swore and fought and showed no restraint to anyone but the soft-spoken Eider and his two guns. Ruther Painter, after a first attempt at authority, lapsed into silence. He rode his third wagon day after day and said little.

Dulles Buckmaster lingered between life and death, his woman's sobs during the night a continual reminder to other men to mind their business, for the reason for Buckmaster's "accident" had crept through the camp. There should be no conniving among men in this train. And *Stay away from Marka.*

Hans saw all this clearly. Painter and Eider had started out the top two. Painter, by reason of his election; Eider because of his guns. Now Painter had fallen to nothing. But the Dutchman, inexplicably, had taken Painter's place. First, because of his courage at the election, then because of his initiative at pulling out the wagons. The lead had fallen between Hans and Race, and Race was making it plain where he wanted the men to look.

Hans knew Eider wanted to get rid of him; Hans watched and was careful. And they crossed the Elkhorn, the shallow Cedar, and the Calamus, Hans handling his wagon all alone on these crossings, for no one dared assist him and the bullwhackers ignored him. He trailed along in the ruck of the caravan, the outlaw of the trace.

Hans kept thinking to himself: "I'll have to fight him some day. How shall I fight him? She wants me to. She watches me all the time."

And then they came to The Loupe And The Loupe was to be the place of the first shakedown.

The train halted, dust rolling on ahead. Men left with axes. And then in the afternoon sun Eider rode back the train length on his horse. He said to Hans: "This is as far as you go." His voice was brittle with satisfaction.

Hans stood up on his wagon. He saw bullwhackers all along the raging river felling great poplars and cottonwoods. Already they were tying up the first wagons to float them across. He saw Blackie and the Swede go down the line of wagons with a hat held out. The settlers asked questions, wives shrieked something to be hushed quickly by their men. The homesteaders reluctantly dug into their wallets after a glance backward. They saw Eider and Hans Marka talking.

"The first shakedown," Hans murmured.

Eider's face darkened. "How did you know? Back at the Grove?"

"I have ears. I know things."

Eider's brown eyes slitted. "Maybe you know too much to let go loose."

Hans shrugged. "I'm coming along." His eyes had seen Julee Painter looking back.

Eider smiled at the river. "You aren't crossing this one alone, Marka. I hope you try it." He touched spurs to his horse and moved ahead.

Hans watched the scene. His cows could swim it, but not pulling his wagon. He'd mire in each shore with those heavy logs tied on. The bullwhackers were using teams and long cables, but one man, alone. . .

At sundown he saw the last nester's wagon drawn across—for a price, and Hans sat on the shore. Men and women

looked back, but none waved. They didn't dare to. They were puppets of Race Eider and his twenty-two renegades.

The line moved up the cliff, as outlined against the red sky for a slow-moving instant, then just dust remained, a red stain on the hills.

And the inventive Dutch boy began to figure a way across.

But he had to be careful. From now on it would be gunplay. He was definitely outside the pale of Race Eider's wagon train.

CHAPTER IV

Burned Out

IT WAS almost dark before Hans hit upon a plan. And it was utter blackness before he had his wagon rigged. He went to sleep that night pleased with himself.

He awoke a short while later, puzzled at what had awakened him. Then he heard it again. His lead cow, Bessie, was grunting. She did it when excited or when strangers were around. Hans stared up at his dim canvas roof, straining his ears for other sounds, and then he heard footsteps on the boot of his wagon. And one at the rear end! Eider! He'd left two men behind to finish him off!

Hans twisted silently in his blankets, reaching for the gun Buckmaster had given him, but orange flame spurted through the night and he felt blinding fire take him in the right side. At the same instant he triggered the huge revolver.

Jagged flame shot through the close confines of the canvas wagon. From front and back came fire, and the youth in the middle, fighting for consciousness, returned it until the hammer clicked on an empty cylinder. And then there was strange silence. Even the last click had been loud, alone.

Hans gasped. He was hit high in the shoulder, he knew. And there were streaks of pain in his arms and legs also, but he sensed that miraculously no lead had ploughed through any vital spot. He heard a groan. Fighting the nausea, he crawled to the endgate. A strange bullwhacker lay sprawled on the sand. Hans looked toward the river. A dozen steps down that way another form lay crumpled in the moonlight. Both men were dying.

Hans muttered, "Pretty good shooting for the first time." He saw Bessie, the lead cow, now silently grazing again. "Thanks, Bessie," he muttered. He fell headlong on the sand and lost consciousness.

IT was a week before Hans could be up and move around with any freedom. But it was a good and welcome week for his draft animals, and when at last he headed them into the raging waters it was with confidence. They would swim strongly. The rig he had fixed for his laden wagon consisted of salvaged barrels tied under and front and back and on both sides— many of the settlers had discarded one of each one's two barrels tied to the side of each wagon, to make room for the heavy logs. The other barrel, full of water, they had foolishly put inside the wagons, making the load heavier.

"Sheep," Hans muttered, thinking of them.

He sent his cows into the river. The wagon floated and bounced almost as a cork. Ten minutes of struggling and swimming and the panting cows, with Bessie in the lead, gained footholds far down the stream on the other side. They drew the cumbersome-looking load upon the sand.

Hans got down, untied the ropes, put the barrels into the wagon with the plough, axes and other tools, and then he headed for the faint trace up on the cliff. He wasn't thinking of the next river he'd have to cross alone; he was thinking of the four cartridges he had left.

The prairie lay huge and forlorn before him. Green desolation stretched westward—hills, blue sky, and a faint trace bent through the grass.

He watched the crushed grass lines

stretching away from him with maddening distance. He thought of the girl's soft eyes. He cracked the bull-shag. The cows moved forward in creaking yokes.

All day he wove through the long grass. His wheels crushed a new trail. His breaking plough stood thrusting high on the wagon load ahead of the tumbled canvas. It was long and yacht-like and its curved blade of polished steel gave his wagon the appearance of a ship riding on a green sea, up and down, up and down. And the *chuck-chuck* of the wheels on the skeins was a low muttering sound which sent prairie chicken and plover, curlew and killdeer screaming and flying into the air from the grass, and each buffalo wallo he passed. And the myriad cries shook the sweet-smelling clean air but Hans Marka, the young Dutch man, didn't thrill to it. The same urge that sent the Canadian geese in their marvelously ranked army northward over his head, their wings whirring and eyes glistening with some mysterious hope, had seized the stolid Hans. A girl was down the trail. She was with a man she hated and feared.

Hans Marka fingered the four shells in his ragged shirt pocket. He followed the bent trace until it was too dark to see.

AT NOON the following day he came to the big train's second camp since leaving The Loupe. A derelict wagon sprawled brokenly to one side. Hans recognized it as Ed Waller's. Then he saw to one side of the trace a heap of fresh earth rising above the long waving grasses. He bent to the tail-gate board which had been twisted from Waller's wagon. He read: SARAH WALLER, WIFE OF EDWARD WALLER. DIED MAY 9TH, 1867. AGE 32. MAY GOD REST HER . . .

He couldn't read the rest of the scrawl. He murmured, "Thirty-two. She looked fifty." He took off his hat.

That evening he sighted his first buffalo. They watched him curiously and his cows showed no fear. The buffalo snorted when the lone wagon came within two hundred yards, then lumbered away in their humpy, peculiar run.

Hans felt his four shells. Fresh meat would taste good. But at two hundred yards—he shook his head. And he didn't have time to stalk them. He went on.

The fifth day the trace showed signs of freshness. "They can't be more than two days ahead," he muttered. He had been looking for another grave all along —Buckmaster's—but he had seen none, And unaccountably he felt much relieved. He liked Buckmaster.

But at dawn-mist the following day he had hardly started against the continual hills when he sighted two black heaps of prairie loam. Death had struck the caravan again!

He flung himself in anxiety off his wagon to read the headboards. There were none.

He stood contemplating the earth mounds for a long minute, the fear that had choked his throat slowly receding. He thought, "These can't be the graves of someone loved." He returned to his wagon and pressed onward.

And late that night he came to the wide and heavy-running North Platte, the dangerous river.

He saw the caravan had had some trouble crossing. Trees of any size had not been available and on rocks far down in midstream he saw the wreckage of two wagons. Hans tightened his jaw. In the weeks that had passed, the prairie and his dangerous game with Eider had taught him patience and coolness and steely nerve. A man on his own on these plains, he had learned, had to be alert to chance, brave to gamble swiftly. He looked at the choppy, swift-moving river, halted his wagon on the sand near the edge and, by the light of a hasty campfire, began lashing his barrels for the crossing at dawn.

But for once his native caution deserted him. Too intent on his task, he did not see the horse and savage rider silhouetted on the dim hill back from the river, then another rider, and another. . . .

Again it was Bessie who gave him the first warning, and then it was too late.

Red figures, in paint and war feathers, were pouring down the sand bank. They saw he'd seen them. Their silence burst into screaming whoops, and arrows whispered out of the night as the Indians made for the lone man.

Hans was tying on a barrel. An arrow struck the oak keg not two inches from his arm; another ripped the canvas at his ear. Hans dropped the barrel and made a dive for his wagon.

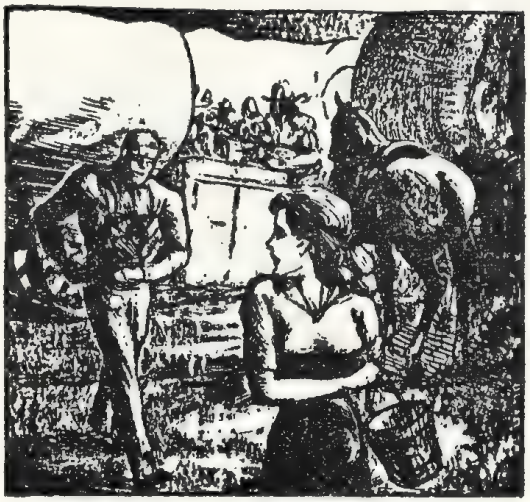
He made it. He saw the Indians, an even dozen of them, ride twice around his wagon in the darkness, then spot his cows. With joyous whoops they choused them out of the brush, but the cows ran back.

Hans heard his beloved cows run ragged and, muttering, sought the Walker Dragoon from under the spring seat. He saw an Indian ride bravely through the firelight, eyes on the cows, and Hans let him have it. The Indian screamed and went over. He lay dead on the sand.

Hair-raising screams came from the night. Hans muttered: "Now if you do get me, the score will be even." Then he took stock of his situation and grimaced. Another lesson learned the hard way.

FOOLISHLY he had stopped in open sand in his haste to get across on the morrow. The Indians, even if he could miraculously hold them off with his three shells that night, would simply ring him the next morning and keep him at bay. And there would be no help coming—not to him. He was a lone wagon, an outlaw of the trace. And the red devils could take their own sweet time to wait him out, or burn him out or crush him by sheer numbers in the darkness. Maybe he wouldn't live to learn. He thought swiftly.

He had to get out of that wagon and away that night if he wanted to live! And with the stolidity that was in his Dutch make-up he put his gun inside his shirt, tied up his three remaining shells and wrapped them all tightly around his waist with strips of grain sack. Then he took off his shoes and in the same manner tied them snug across



"Julee, put down that bucket," Hans said as he came forward.

his back. He looked once about him and the dim blackness, at his plough, his axe, the tools he'd worked with in the few short years of his farming life and to which he'd become attached, then he stole to the front of the wagon. All was silent.

His bared feet made no sound. The wagon did not creak under his carefully shifting weight. He dropped like a shadow close over the boot, and in the warm sand he raced for the river, a turgid, glinting ribbon in the cloud-sprinkled moonlight.

He had almost reached it when a howl went up. They had discovered him! There was a quick thunder of horses' hooves, then the animals struck the sand, slowed them. Hans Marka raced for that river with his life. His daring had caught them by surprise.

The Indians gained. The hooves sounded like someone striking a pillow rapidly. Arrows whispered again through the night into the sand about him. He heard a triumphant scream directly behind him and then Hans leaped headlong. He struck the water.

He swam. The river turned him over and over. Silt choked his mouth and got into his eyes and ears and hair. He came up once, gasped, then the river took him down again. He fought it and he didn't know how many times this happened when the irresistible current slapped him

hard against something, held him there an instant, then slowly started to drag him away once more.

In desperation Hans grasped at the object. He was only half-conscious but he knew if he was dragged down once more into that black, rolling water he might just as well have stayed back there and fought out his hopeless fight against the Indians.

His fingers closed on what strangely seemed like the iron bolster of a wagon and he hung on. After a minute the current surge eased and slid to a deeper side and Hans dully pulled himself upward.

It *was* a wagon! And then he dimly remembered the wrecked vehicles he'd seen far down in midstream. They were snagged on some rocks.

Sobbing for breath, he weakly climbed into the battered box and fell headlong into the stinky hot water inside. He lay there exhausted.

DAWN came. Hans looked through cracks of the wagon. The Indians had his possessions out. They were rounding up his cows. Hans bit his lip hard as he saw Bessie driven over the hill. He saw his clothes distributed, torn, fought over; his food, trinkets he'd brought from home, given him by his mother and brothers and sisters. Hans closed his eyes. When he opened them a column of smoke was going up. In a little while there was nothing left.

He had thought the savages would go away. They didn't. There were eight left after the cows had been driven away, and these eight now divided, four crossing at a ford far upstream which the settlers hadn't found, and four remaining on the other side. And thus they began searching the banks.

Hans held his breath. They came down opposite the wrecked wagons. They stopped and shouted across at each other. They looked at the narrow raging stream at this part. Then the one who looked like a young chief, in his yellow paint and more colorful feathers, shouted something and they moved on. Hans breathed with relief. Had he by a miracle foxed the wily devils?

But by mid-morning they were back. The young chief threw down his lance and took off his finery, which consisted mostly of one of Hans' red-plaid woolen shirts. Hans grew still in his wagon box. If the chief came out there, Hans would have to stab him to death. He'd have another to his credit, anyway. Then let the others outwait him. Maybe he'd trust the river at night again.

But the young chief didn't make it. The river seized him with its powerful undertow. The Indian sensed the full fury in midstream. Only by mighty effort did he kick to the surface and return, gaining the bank a hundred yards downstream. He got up, panting and shouted something, shaking his head. The four on the far side returned to the ford. Half an hour later the eight disappeared over the hill over which the cows had been driven. Hans lay in his hot, water-stinking box with the sun starting to beat down, and he grew to hate Race Eider with an intense and deliberate fury. He had lost everything.

Night came with gentle coolness. Hans, fully rested, stood up in the wagon box, a thing he hadn't dared before even if the Indians had seemed to disappear. They were treacherous, he knew. But he also knew he had to make a break for it. The wagon train would be getting too far ahead.

The broken hulk beneath him teetered with his weight and for a moment he had the wild thought of shoving it off and hanging on, then knew there was too much iron to the under-pinning to float. So taking a deep breath, he plunged into the strong river for the western side.

He didn't fight the current this time. He had learned his lesson. He let it carry him. He took his breaths when he hit air. He stroked when he felt the pull lessen and he was astonished when he came up for his fifth breath. The shore wasn't twenty paces away and the current was almost negligible. He had traversed the North Platte, swimming.

CHAPTER V

Two Kinds of Savages

DAYS later a gaunt, ragged creature sat in the ooze of a marsh and ravenously tore at the breast of a snow goose. The man's front was covered with mud—he had crawled two hundred paces on his belly to fling his knife into the flock and had been lucky. It was the first time in a thousand tries the past two days. He had looked for birds' eggs, but it was too early in spring; he had tried eating grass; it was tasteless. Willow shoots and lily bulbs did not fill or satisfy. Meat was what his body cried for, and now he had it. Hans Marka ate of the tough, stringy flesh until he could eat no more. It was another mark in his education toward being an Indian—wild-animal savagery. Each day taught many things. And each day he practiced handling the gun, pointing it. Cunning patience, stealth. Each waking hour was filled with these practices.

Finally he wiped his blade, tied the remains of the goose in one of the grain-sack strips and fought his way out of the swamp to the bent-grass trace. There were two more hours of daylight. He broke into a steady, bent-knee trot, another thing he'd learned.

Wild color lighted the prairie as the sun dipped beneath the green hills. The curlews and the paririe chickens were giving out in one last insane chorus. The land, sky, the hills—it was incredibly lonely. And the Dutchman ran on, as he had for so long.

Suddenly he stopped. A figure on the farthest hill! Indians? He dropped instantly to his belly. The figure wavered, come over the hill, then dipped into the shadows. Indian cunning gripped Hans.

He did not rise. He watched, with eyes slitted. The trace had grown fresh this day. Maybe this was a lone Indian scouting on foot, with his horse tied in some swale. But the figure had seemed to come toward him. Wisely Hans waited. No hurry.

Twilight darkened. Hans crept into a ravine and proceeded with head just at ground level. He was wary, hand on knife hilt.

And then the figure burst over a rise and almost fell on top of Hans Marka, who had risen like a striking shadow, knife in hand.

It was Ed Waller! Hans jerked back his knife just in time.

Waller gave a scream and fell backward. Then, still screaming wildly, he clawed to his feet and began running and falling back down the hill. Hans shouted and ran after. "Wait! It's Marka!"

Waller finally fell and couldn't get up and then he saw it was the Dutch youth. His weak mouth waggled; his eyes opened and closed. "You . . . I thought you were an Indian! I was sure . . . Where did you come from?"

Hans sat down Indian-fashion. He frowned. There was something strange here. And something odd in the way Waller talked.

Hans said: "Where you going? Where's the train?"

Waller jerked his thumb backward. "There. I'm going home."

"Home?"

"Yes. It's safe there."

Hans stared. Waller's wide eyes were jumping now, looking around. The man passed a skinny hand over his jaw and Hans saw the hand trembled. And Hans knew Ed Waller had lost his mind. He had run away from the train to go back. But with Indians all around—

Then he saw the pack on Waller's shoulders, and his mouth began to work. Food! Cooked food! Waller had prepared properly to run away! In spite of his warped mind. "Shall we eat?" Hans whispered.

The other stared, then grew suspicious. But Hans smiled and Waller said, "You're young. We will eat."

WALLER had wormy prunes in his sack a strip of bacon, some flour and salt, coffee, and the rest jammed with dried beans. He had one can and a cup and some matches. The two made camp in a deep ravine that Hans with his new plains wisdom had insisted upon.

As Hans built a tiny fire and cooked beans in water from a wayward trill, he asked Waller a thousand questions. Yes, the girl was all right. Waller answered. Her old man seldom talked any more. Often he stayed in his wagon all day. Buckmaster hadn't died. He was out driving his own wagon now. No, Buckmaster didn't know what had struck him. So he said. He didn't talk much either. None of the settlers did; Eider had taken all their guns away from them. And most of their money for river crossings.

"The women were riled wild about that. Guess they'd worked as hard as the men for that money. Sarah—" He stopped and flung his ragged head into his hands and broke into sobs.

"What about your wife?" Hans asked.

"She earned all our money. She'd saved it. At that first crossing, The Loupe, Eider struck her when she wouldn't give him the money. She died . . . the next night—"

Hans remembered the board from the tail-gate, the mound of earth. So Sarah Waller had died from the result of a blow by Race Eider. Hans grew silent. He stared into the fire. Pennsylvania seemed a long way away.

He ate fiercely, with Ed Waller across the fire nervously picking at his food and watching each mouthful Hans took. There was alarm in Waller's eyes at the amount Hans put away, and when the fire had died down and Hans curled up next to it, Waller counted the wormy prunes and carefully rewrapped the remaining bacon in its greasy cloth. Then he lay down in the shadows, eyes open, staring at the coals, waiting. . . .

When Hans awakened the next morning Ed Waller was gone.

Hans felt a reluctant sympathy for the man who loved his wife so much, in spite of the way he'd treated her. And now that his moorings were gone, Waller's mind had cast off also. He was a lonely, wandering figure on the prairie, and Hans knew that sooner or later the Indians would get him; the country was crawling with the savages. Alone Hans rose and moved on, doubly wary, an Indian himself.

A dozen times that day he saw sign of the red men—an unshod hoofprint mark, the press of moccasin at a buffalo wallow. He kept a continual eye on the horizon, front and back. He jogged on. He knew his only salvation was to catch up to that train; for he had been mostly lucky so far, much as he'd learned of Indian cunning.

Twice that afternoon he hid in gullies as Indians loomed on the horizon, and it became increasingly evident to him that they also were trailing the train. They were in doubles and small groups; they were gathering, waiting. Hans proceeded more slowly.

The sign of the train grew fresh, unmistakably. Camp refuse drew flies. Hans ran on. His boots, hard and dried from frequent immersing and their day in the wrecked wagon box, had chafed his feet into swollen stems. Hatless, his face and neck was burned the color of brick; the prairie sun even made red streaks on his skin through the rents of his shirt. His trousers long since had lost their knees. He clung to his knife and Walker Colt and the three cartridges, although he knew they were useless from his bout with the North Platte.

THAT night he grilled the remainder of the snow goose over a small fire deep in a brushy draw—he had kept some of Waller's matches—then immediately put out the blaze. He ate the tough meat stoically. Tomorrow he would catch up to the train. And with luck—

He wondered what he would do. What *could* he do? Race Eider would shoot him at sight. He had no doubt of that. They were beyond civilization. All restraint, he knew, long since had left the bullwhacker crew. Even by the sign he could tell all was not well with the train; their camps were shorter and shorter each day and again fear came up within him for the girl.

He tried to plan something. He not only had Eider to contend with but the treachery and plotting of Blackie and

Swede, who were planning a double-cross of Eider. And then there was the fact Eider had taken all the guns from the homesteaders. Hans slept fitfully through the night.

In the green, winking dawn he moved down the drenched gully keeping well to the brush; and he forsook the trace to bear westward on his own. The cordon of Indians was too close on the heels of the train for him to try to penetrate. The Indians did not know someone was coming up from their rear.

As Hans crept from the gully he saw five in a band riding southward. He did not know what kind they were—they rode small, fast horses and carried lances—and Hans waited until they were out of sight.

He moved northward, then swung west to keep parallel with the train and he moved with the utmost caution, hugging the grassy swales and brush gullies. There was no need for haste any longer, just caution, for the train was but a few miles ahead and he could catch up to it after dark. Then what? The thought always brought him up abruptly.

He knocked over a prairie chicken with a stone. It was his dinner, raw, for he did not dare a fire. Its smoke would betray him. In the afternoon he came into low butte country and he started edging southward. He hadn't seen an Indian all afternoon.

At dusk he climbed one of the buttes and, hugging the ground, he looked over the rolling country to the south. He saw white canvas tops in a wide green valley. Dusk was washing the valley into slow blackness. Points of fire were springing up. The wagons were circled. Like a hawk-faced Indian he crouched and planned.

He drifted his eyes over the roughening yellow buttes and the green prairie to the east but in the great hush of evening he heard nothing and saw nothing, as he had expected. He wondered where the Indians were gathering. He knew they were somewhere close.

Half an hour later he crept cautiously down from the skyline and threaded the course through the buttes which he had chosen. He was jogging again. Welcome darkness had come.

HANS crept through the grass toward the looming wagon tops. A dull fire smouldered inside the ring of wagons. He had spotted the sentry on the other side and was coming in from the rear. The trick now was to find Buckmaster without arousing the camp. He bellied forward inch by inch. This came easy to him now.

He came to a knee at the nearest wagon's hubcap and stared at the vehicle. It was the powerful, red-spoked Murphy from which the votes had been counted back in Council Bluffs. But he could barely recognize it. It looked twenty years old. Paintless, weather-beaten, broken. And he thought if wagons became thus in the few short weeks that had passed, what would this trek do to human beings? To Julee Painter? He pressed his lips tight and started working around the circle. Again he had Indian stealth.

He came closer to the fire. He recognized bullwhackers hunched around it, some sleeping, lying sprawled, and he wondered which was Race Eider. His progress became slow, ticklish.

He saw blanketed figures on the inside of the circle sleeping close to the wagons and guessed they were the homesteaders. But which one was Buckmaster?

Then he came to it. He recognized the bolted and spliced reach of Buckmaster's chunky wagon and he crawled beneath the axle toward a sleeping figure.

Hans put his hand softly over the man's mouth. The man started, then froze. Hans whispered, "It's Hans Marka."

The rigidity went out of the man. He stared disbelievingly in the darkness. He saw the Dutch youth.

"Hans!"

"Sh-h-h." Hans gripped Buckmaster's horny fists in return, but, flat on his belly, he kept his eyes on the men at the fire. Hans whispered: "Is . . . is she all right?"

"She- Who the—?" Then Buckmaster knew. "Don't worry about her. She's the only one that devil hasn't got buffaloed. I tell you it's been hell since we left The Loupe. Eider runs the camp as if we were dogs."

Hans nodded. "He took your guns."

"How did you know?"

Then Hans told him about meeting the crazed Ed Waller on the back trail. Buckmaster swore. "Poor devil! Likely out of his misery by now."

In the darkness Hans could see the gauntness of the man before him; by his voice he could guess at the pain Buckmaster had endured. Hans whispered, "Can you awaken the rest of your men without the bullwhackers seeing you? I've got a plan to get guns into your hands."

"Guns?" Buckmaster's voice trembled. "Guns to shoot Eider?" His voice was wire-tight; it vibrated with hate.

"I'll sneak around by the sentry while you awaken your men and tell them the plan. I know the war whoop of the Indians. Eider will issue you guns to defend the camp. You turn on the bullwhackers. If they don't surrender, cut them down. I suppose you've found out by now it's either you or them."

"We've found out," Buckmaster said bitterly.

Hans grimly touched the gun in his ragged waistband. "Have you any shells for this? I've been practicing aiming it for weeks."

The other stared hungrily at the weapon. "Yes. And I'd like to have that gun. I'd get Eider—tonight!"

Hans shook his head. "Mine is a better plan—" He stopped. Men from the bullwhackers' fire were looking toward them. And then Hans was conscious of someone at his back. He twisted his head in the grass. Buckmaster's wife had stepped from the schooner.

She recognized Hans instantly; saw the situation and its danger. She walked across the camp to a water barrel where she took a drink. And the watching bullwhackers sank to the ground again.

Hans softly blew the sweat from his upper lip. Thank heaven for the presence of mind the frontier woman had.

Buckmaster was whispering, "Ann hid a box. I'll get them."

IN the blackness between the wheels Buckmaster handed him the cartridges. Ann, his wife, had come back.

She pressed the Dutch youth's hand. "It's good to see you, Hans." Then she gave a frightened glance toward the black, yawning prairie. "You aren't going out there—alone?"

Buckmaster laughed tersely. "Where do you think he's been these weeks? He's safe out there." He glanced bitterly toward the fire.

Hans chuckled. "I've turned Indian."

She said softly, "I'll tell her I saw you—you're safe." The woman's eyes were proud on him, and Hans said quickly to Buckmaster, "If there's any fighting, don't keep an eye on Eider only—keep one on that Blackie also."

"Blackie?" Buckmaster peered in the darkness. "You say you saw Waller. Didn't he tell you— "A halloo came from the night. "They're changing sentries! They might come this way. Hurry!"

Hans felt the grip of Buckmaster's wide hand, then Hans melted into the blackness as an Indian. But what remained closest to his heart was Ann Buckmaster's words about Julee Painter. She would be glad he was safe.

A keen sense of the mounting climax arose in him and, as he circled the camp, he came to a jagged rock tongue extending from a nearby butte. It was on the outside of the changing sentries; it was ideally situated above the plain and the camp.

He had crouched among the rocks and put his mouth to the ground to muffle his cry, when a faint tremor came to him from the earth. He listened; then fear came to him for the train. Indians *were* coming. The drum of hundreds of hooves on the prairie made that tremor. Without hesitation he raised his voice full and gave a war-whoop cry across the camp.

There was a moment of silence, then the sentries were running. Inside the circled wagons the fire suddenly blazed higher.

"Fools," Hans muttered. "Put out that fire! Don't build it." He saw men's figures scurrying around, the flash of weapons. Eider was passing out ammunitions and guns. Then Hans recalled the plan. Would Buckmaster and the settlers make a disastrous move *before* the Indians struck? *That would spell doom for the entire train!*

Hans thought of dashing into the camp to halt the mutiny of the settlers, but he knew he'd be throwing his life away if Eider spotted him first. And the train needed every fighting man now, that was certain.

He raised his voice into the war whoop again. And then a third time. He waited and then sounded it twice again. *There,* he thought, *Buckmaster must know something different is in the wind. This should convince him.*

Hans put his ear to the rocky ground. The thud of those Indian horses were plain now. They must be coming down one of those wide draws to his back. They'd rendezvoused to the west, ahead of the train, then. And suddenly the plains wisdom that he'd gained the past weeks came frantically alive. The Indians were at his back, the camp ahead. He was between them!

His danger hit him like a cold rain. He shivered. The redskins undoubtedly had the camp all scouted; they'd crawl down this very ridge onto the camp. And there was only wide, open plain on all sides.

Desperately Hans cast about for an escape route, then he remembered a brush-choked ravine a score of paces toward the west—toward the approaching redskins.

There was no time to lose. He ran swiftly in the dim blackness and flung himself over the brink.

He tried to stay his fall by clinging to brush the grasses. They gave way. He toppled down with rock and shale and brush and he knew no more.

CHAPTER VI

The Unexpected

WHEN he opened his eyes, Hans wondered how long he'd been unconscious. He wondered if any bones were broken. But he didn't move. His sharp wit and memory and the nights on the prairie hiding had taught him to lie still. Let the enemy move first.

The stars above the narrow chasm were bright, unwinking. Wind soughed lonely through the gorge. But wasn't that an additional whisper above there—as skin drawn over brush, hands pressing gravel, buckskin moving over flattened grass? He didn't breathe.

Time dragged ageless. He no longer heard bodies creeping. It must be after midnight. Then a single shot from the prairie, another, another—war whoops—men's curses—then all was bedlam. The Indians had attacked!

No longer fearful of being heard, Hans twisted from the rocks pinning him. He fought erect. Thorns tore at his clothes but he disregarded them; no bones were broken. He beat circulation into his aching legs and felt for his Dragoon and the shells. He had lost the gun. Feverishly he searched. The sounds of fury increased on the prairie. At last he found the gun among the rocks. It was unbroken. The shells were safe in his shirt. With bleeding torn nails he attacked the steep wall down which he'd fallen.

He got up ten feet, fell back. He tried the other side. The thorny bushes gave to his pulling claws. He fell again. He tried for crevices this time, throwing caution away. He almost got to the top when a rock crumpled and he went back. He grasped a shadowy piece of brush in desperation. The last-year thorns lacerated his hands fearfully, but the aged brush had a grim hold in the rock crevice. It held.

Trembling, sweating, Hans rolled over on his belly at the brink. When he'd caught his breath he crawled forward. The camp was lighted by two fires from burning wagons. The settlers had pushed

the wagons out of the circle and had closed the ring with others, but the oxen and stock in the circle had gone berserk from the gunfire and clamor. They'd trampled everything inside the inclosure, going around and around. Hans could see the human defenders crouching low and dimly beneath the wagon reaches, precariously between two dangers—the millrace inside and the Indians on the outside.

Dawn was streaking the east. As if someone had widened a door to a grey-lit room, grey light was creeping over the prairie swiftly. The sky was growing wide and beautiful, but Hans paid no attention to the awakening prairie day; he was judging the effect light would have on the attack. Already he saw Indians were withdrawing from forward positions in the grass. He saw where they'd tried to fire the grass but it had been too green. He saw where scores of fire arrows had scorched great holes in canvas tops before the settlers had put them out—all but two, the two wagons that had burned—and he saw dim crumpled figures inside and outside the enclosure. Close to the wagons some of the Indians lay dead, and Hans knew the fighting at one time had been hand-to-hand.

He wondered if anyone he knew in the train had been killed—Buckmaster? Eider? *Julee. . .* He cast out the thought that made his arms and legs become weak.

He saw the Indians were mounting their ponies and he remembered the rush they'd made his wagon at The Loupe. It would be their final dash! And if successful— How could he help?

THE INDIANS came out of the rocky draw in a streaking line, low and to one side of their horses' withers, their feathers and colored buckskin flying in their rush. Their whoops came long and continuous until they became an undulating high-pitched sound that beat eternally on the eardrums. It sent shivers up Hans' spine. This was something different from anything he'd ever experienced. They seemed to fascinate the defenders into chilled immobility.

The redskins raced around and around, growing closer and closer. They shot arrows with remarkable dexterity from every position on their ponies. They were particularly adept at shooting from beneath their mounts' necks while completely hidden from the other side.

The thought suddenly flashed a great idea to Hans. It would be the simplest thing in the world to pick off those figures from *this* side, *if he could get close enough!* The sounds of their hollering, the explosion of the settlers' guns, which now had begun, would drown out his intermittent shots. If he could get closer—

He began to creep down the ridge, keeping to cover like the wild prairie creature he had been for the past weeks. His training was paying off.

He came to the plain. Another wagon was on fire now. The settlers tried to move it. Two fell, arrows protuding from chests. The wagons burned, throwing flames toward others. Some Indians toppled, but not many. The settlers began shooting the redskins' horses now. The animals' screams added to the horror. They plunged, wounded and kicking, over fallen Indians. Dismounted savages tried to squirm through the grass to safety. Smoke hung over the prairie like a pall.

With trembling fingers Hans fitted shells into the pistol. He was dangerously close now, so close they might detect him if his gunfire didn't coincide with other sounds. But he had to chance it. Those wagons would burn down the train in another ten minutes. Now to see of his practicing and aiming had done any good.

He thrust forth the gun, sighted on a gaudy brave whom he knew to be a chief because he resembled the chief back at The Loupe crossing, and he squeezed the trigger.

The report was drowned in the continuous roar. Hans looked. The savage dropped like a stone from his clinging

perch; the horse galloped away.

"Bull's-eye," Hans muttered. He watched the other circling Indians. None had noticed the direction of the sound, nor the added faint wisp of smoke from the prairie grass, which already was smouldering in spots from last night.

Hans aimed at a second Indian. He missed. He drew on a third racing figure. The man lost his hold, grasped again. The horse plunged, then flopped down. Hans' bullet had gone through both.

He kept on shooting. He became remarkably adept and the pile of bodies and horses in front of him became surprisingly high. A great, gaudy-clothed warrior suddenly noticed it, raised a high-pitched yell, then a hand. He pulled to one side, regarded the pile. Hans' heart began to crawl into his throat. Other Indians drew their sweating mounts to their leader, out of gun range. There was much jabbering and waving of arms.

WONDER and incredulity showed in their faces and actions. They looked toward the smoking wagons on that side. In the growing light they saw a girl there with a long Sharps snuggled against her cheek. She was almost behind a set of rug-covered trunks.

Hans heart suddenly sang. Julee Painter! She was alive!

The warrior, raising his fists which clenched bow and arrows, shouted something to the sky, his face veined and purpling, as if calling on the gods to wreak vengeance on the paleface woman.

At that instant a volley of gunfire came from wagons, and the deeper note of the long-range Sharps boomed, and the mighty-thewed warrior froze in his up-raised position. The arrows spewed from his hand; the bow clattered down. He stood transfixed for one awful instant, then toppled headfirst over his spotted pony's withers. He fell dead.

The Indians stared. They looked at the wagon train, then at the color-booming sky at which the warrior had shouted, then as one they wheeled their ponies and raced up the draw into the butte-land. Their chief had brought the curse of the gods upon them.

The distance from that wagon train had been great—too great even for a Sharps. Hans put down his pistol and over his shoulder watched the last of the Indians disappear. His days of empty-pistol practicing and pointing had done it! But now what? He lay still.

He saw the settlers pull out the burning wagons, quench the flames with buckets. He saw the girl there, and Buckmaster . . . . .

The wagons were clear now. Hans raised his head and softly uttered the Indian war whoop. It was as an echo from a dead redskin lying among the grasses.

But the men in the train heard it. Hans saw bullwhackers look around, then he saw Buckmaster staring over the grass. Hans repeated it, softer this time. Buckmaster turned, gave a shake of his right fist, as if it were a signal. The next moment Hans saw gun muzzles pointed at certain men, rifles were dropping, hands going up.

Buckmaster had guessed! With a grin Hans came to his feet and ran toward the train.

He sprang over a wagon tongue and was among them. He laughed and looked around. Faces were missing but there were many he knew. He saw two gaunt settlers had their rifles pointing at Race Eider's chest. He saw Buckmaster with shirt torn, blood on his black-whiskered face swinging a rifle ominously at all the covered, astonished bullwhackers. He saw Julee Painter, with the heavy Sharps, at the edge of the crowd. She stared at Hans; her beautiful, smooth face was crimsoning; her eyes were growing brighter. . . . "Hans! Hans!"

"Look out!" Buckmaster shouted. "Eider!"

HANS whirled, catlike. Race Eider, his brown weasel-like face choked with fury, made a play for his gun. Hans swept up his revolver; the two gaunt

settlers swung their rifle muzzles. It was as if all three were moved by a single crank.

But the settlers were too slow. Eider sprang forward out of their direction as they fired. Hans' gun exploded in his hand, but he also had jerked in his haste. Eider's hat flew off, then Eider's lean and wiry paws, splaying to the .45s at his hips, came up, and Hans saw fire winking from them, felt fire come into his body and burn. He tried to trigger his Walker Dragoon but the strength was gone from his hands in a dizzy spell and he knew he was falling down. And guns were roaring all around him but Race Eider leaped away, unharmed. Eider ran behind a wagon. There was a horse there, his black horse, and bare-backed Race Eider leaped upon the animal. He kicked heels to the black's belly and the animal cleared an uptilted wagon tongue as if it had springs in its delicate legs.

Hans cried in his heart. *Eider was getting away! Race Eider was escaping free! After all that he had caused—!*

The booming roar of a Sharps spoke in the bubbling confusion. Race Eider stiffened on the black, slowly raised his arms, then the horse ran out from beneath him. The long, broad man in the flashy buckskin hit the prairie sod, bounced once, a gun rolled from a holster, tumbled after him, the gun and man fell together and lay still, almost hidden in the long grass that waved over them.

Race Eider had met his end.

Hans turned from the sitting position to which he'd pulled himself. The dizziness was fading and he was conscious of blood pouring from the crease over his forehead.

"Nice . . . shooting . . . Miss Painter—"

She dropped the rifle. She ran forward.

"Hans! . . . Hans, you poor man—"

He closed his eyes. There it was, better! He didn't mind anything, not now.

CAMPFIRES winked brightly in the night. Someone was strumming a banjo softly. Hans sat beside Buckmaster and Painter. "Tomorrow we can roll," Buckmaster said.

Hans nodded. They'd cleaned up the camp, buried the dead, making fresh mounds above the prairie grass. Just as there had been three mounds on the trail back there, two of them Blackie's and Swede's, had Hans found out Race Eider had shot both his confederates in cold blood when he'd learned they'd been plotting against him. It was one reason why the bullwhackers almost gladly gave in to the settlers. They hated Race Eider's iron rule. The Eider plan had failed.

Painter lifted his shaggy head. A brightness had come into his deep eyes since Hans' arrival.

"Yes, and I'm resigning as captain of this train. I'm appointing young Marka in my stead. He knows the prairie, has gone through it. He is as Indian as they come now, I reckon." He smiled.

Buckmaster nodded. "The men will like that. Hans, you have no wagon now; you can ride with me."

"No," the old trader, Painter, said. "I'm giving him a wagon. Not only a wagon but everything in it. The guns in it will buy him ploughs by the score, and stoves and axes and horses. But if he wants to be a trader, and I know his Dutch blood makes him a sharp one, I will take him in as a partner. Half and half of everything."

Hans saw a figure in a white-flowered blouse and fine linsey skirt. The light of the campfire by the three Conestogas caught a glint of hair like burnished copper. She was looking at him. She had a bucket in her hand as if she were going to get water.

Hans didn't hear any more of what Painter said. He rose and went across the circled camp grounds and many eyes around fires saw and watched him, and the women smiled and men drew long on their pipes and winked at one another. And Buckmaster and Painter fell silent, a peaceful silence.

"Julee," Hans said. "Put down that bucket."

"Do you think I dressed up just to carry a bucket?" She put it down.

"No," he said with direct frankness. "But I remember how handy you are with one." He stepped forward. He was sure of himself. He had gone through a tempering fire the past month. He took her hand.

She did not resist him. He led her between the uptilted tongues of their Conestogas and out onto the star-lighted prairie where the nighthawks were crying, and the spring was warm and fresh-smelling. She did not resist him when he took her in his arms. For an instant Hans thought of the girl back there in the Grove with the bold pert eyes and then of this girl who was different. She was clinging. She was looking up to him. He smiled.

Behind them the banjo strummed with a quicker, lighter note.

Rawhide Sacrifice

By GORDON DOZIER

SAM HOUSTON ran away from his Tennessee home in his boyhood and lived several years with the Cherokees. He returned home when eighteen, taught school, studied law, enlisted in the Army, became a district attorney, was appointed major general in the state militia, was elected to Congress, and then became governor of Tennessee at the age of thirty-four.

Shortly after beginning his second term, he wed Eliza Allen. For reasons that have never been made clear, she left him after less than a week. Houston took this very heavily, resigned his governorship and set out to live again with his old friends, the Cherokees.

He found that they had moved west into Arkansas and, drinking heavily the while, he started off on their trail. On the way he met up with a lawyer named John Linton and they traveled a while together. Linton, a scholarly fellow, was also a confirmed alcoholic.

One evening the pair sat by their campfire on the trail. Houston, as he had been busily engaged in doing since he had left Tennessee, was drowning his grief in a jug. Linton, delighted at having found so active a drinking partner, was matching him swallow for swallow.

After a time, Linton delivered a short oration in Latin in praise of his favorite god, Bacchus. Houston listened approvingly, and then stated earnestly that some sacrifice should be made to the deity before the next drink. Whereupon he tossed his hat on the fire.

Linton considered this a first-rate idea, and tossed *his* hat on the flames. Then they gravely tipped the jug again.

The sacrifices—and drinks—continued. Into the bonfire went Houston's buckskin jacket. Linton's coat followed it. It was too beautiful a procedure to stop while it lasted, and the ritualers followed it to its logical conclusion. In a few minutes they were both in their birthday suits.

Then the resigned governor of Tennessee lurched to his feet. "High time to be gettin' on!" he roared. "I got to be findin' my Cherokees!"

Thus it was that in a little while the next village on the trail was treated to the spectacle of two white men pounding down the main street on excellent mounts —the mounts being considerably more clothed than were the merry riders.

Eventually, Houston found the Cherokees and was officially adopted into the tribe. His old sweetheart, Tiana, was still there—a girl said to have been one of the most beautiful Indians on the frontier. He soon married her and lived what he later described as the happiest years of his life with her and the tribe until her death three years later.

For what seem to have been sound reasons, the Indian name bestowed on him by the tribe was "Big Drunk".

Honor for a Harrigan

The Harrigans were not the mildest and most inoffensive of men and when Tim Harrigan rode into town to find his family on the brink of destruction the situation could be handled in only one way—offensive and not so mild!

By LEW MERRILL

ILLUSTRATED BY JOSEPH SOKOLI

TUMBLETON didn't look like the old town to Tim Harrigan, when he rode in shortly after nightfall. He had been away eight months, punching cows in Colorado, and he guessed that even the celebrated Harrigan temper would have cooled down enough by now for him to be welcome at his old man's ranch. But now Main Street, whose one saloon had formerly catered to the local thirst with promptness and effectiveness, was all lit up. Tim counted four saloons and one very noisy dance-hall.

"If prosperity struck Tumbleton, it sure will have struck the Harrigans," was Tim's reaction.

Easing his bay up to a vacant space in the line of hitchracks, he dismounted, tied him, and set forth to investigate.

Inside the honkytonk, gambling was going full blast, a three-piece band was blaring and a number of girls were being whirled around the dance-floor by a crowd of drunken, shouting waddies, who were certainly strangers to Tim. In a corner Tim saw Sid Roscoe, the lawyer, with his arm about a girl's shoulders, looking lovingly into her eyes. Suddenly he looked up, recognized Tim, left the girl and glided like a snake toward the rear of the room, without a word.

Tim walked through the doorway into the adjacent saloon, whose new, long bar was crowded with men. Again he recognized only one face, that of Snead, Saul Robbins' foreman. Saul was the town banker and also owner of the Lazy R, which ran conterminous with the

Tim gripped Shane about the body and, half dragging him, pulled him into the building.

ranch of Tim's father, Emmett Harrigan. There had been trouble in the past and Robbins had a mortgage on the Harrigan ranch. And the sight of Snead, half-drunk at the bar, among the bunch of strange waddies, stirred vague apprehensions in Tim.

Emmett Harrigan had been too hot-headed to pull in his horns when bad times came, and that mortgage had been one of the reasons why Tim had ridden away.

Besides Charlie Snead was one of the beefiest hombres Tim had ever known. He was small and wiry, and wicked, and two-hundred and fifty

pounds of meat, muscle and bone. He didn't appear to be in good condition but a man of that size didn't need to be.

As Tim went up to the bar, he had a feeling that Snead and the others had been expecting him. Snead nudged the big man next to him, and they broke into a roar of laughter. Tim ordered a whiskey from the barkeep—also new in town.

"Yeh, that's him," Snead gibbered. "Little Tim Harrigan come back to pick the bones."

Tim paid no attention. He'd learned to curb the Harrigan temper and bide his time. But everybody seemed to be waiting for his move and he made it casually, after drinking half his glass and setting it down. He leaned confidentially across the mahogany.

"Some changes have been made in Tumbleton since I went away," said Tim to the barkeep.

"Yeh, things have been sort of speedin' up," replied the other. You're the Harrigan who rode away, ain't you?"

"I might have been. Just now I'm the Harrigan who rode back," Tim answered. He was conscious that the whole crowd at the bar was listening. "You're sort of mysterious," he continued, to the barkeep. "If you've got anything to spill, I'm waiting."

"Got nothin' to spill. Leastwise, it depends which side of the spillway you're standin' on, don't it?"

"Are my folks all right?" Tim snapped.

"Your pa's alive and roarin'. So's your ma and your brother, Shane. But your brother Larry kicked the bucket."

A RED wave passed in front of Tim's eyes. Larry, his elder brother, dead? It wasn't possible! Why, Larry had been everything to Tim, as far back as he could remember. Larry had been the only person who could bring old Emmett Harrigan to see reason when he was in one of his hell-roaring moods.

"About when did that happen?" Tim asked quietly.

"Some six months ago, mebbe. Lead poison. Some varmint laid for him at night when he was ridin' home. We all were sure sorry to see him go. And that's all the news I got except that your pa lost his ranch to the bank. Yeh, that's about all."

Somebody snickered behind Tim, and he wheeled. Snead's face was split from ear to ear but he was laughing to himself; it was the big man beside him who was rocking on his heels with mirth.

"You think that funny, General Thumb?" Tim asked him.

The other roared. "Sure, it's always funny when one of them Harrigan skunks gets rubbed out!"

Tim struck from the shoulder, a straight blow into which he put all his anguish and fury. It caught the big man straight on the chin and sent him crashing against the bar.

Glasses fell, bottles toppled over; there was a quick race out of the swinging reach of the two contestants. The giant came back, his arms threshing wildly. A chance blow caught Tim on the forehead and sent him full length on the floor, amid roars from the onlookers.

"Stomp him, Snider! Don't let him get away!"

Snider was as clumsy as his bulk might have led one to anticipate. He came on ponderously, lashing out savagely with his boot. Tim was able to avoid the direct impact of that foot but it caught him on the muscles of the thigh, and for a moment everything went black and a wave of nausea overcame him.

Then somehow he was on his feet and managing to parry Snider's wild blows for a few moments until his strength came back to him.

He could hear the crowd cursing him, and the fighting spirit of the Harrigans entered his soul. Suddenly he launched himself forward as if shot from a spring, letting Snider have it with left and right, until Tim's fists were crimson with the blood that streamed from the other's nose and lips. Snider was striking out blindly and making frantic efforts to land a haymaker, but Tim was himself

again, fighting like a devil with all the science and cunning he knew.

SUDDENLY Snider's foot shot out again. It caught Tim on the ankle, and a spasm of excruciating pain halted him long enough for Snider to dive in and wrap his arms about the younger man.

The watchers roared and closed in to see the kill. All about him Tim could see the leering faces, dark with satisfaction. Even in that moment he wondered why they hated him so. But now all his efforts were concentrated on the work to break Snider's grip, which had shifted to Tim's neck.

Hands like bear's paws, fingers like the claws of some mighty beast were clutching him by the throat. Already Tim's senses were beginning to grow dim and he saw the jeering, blood-stained face of Snider, like a huge orb.

But his resources were not yet quite at an end. He flung himself backward suddenly, at the same time tripping Snider, so that he relaxed his hold somewhat, and the two men rolled to the floor together.

Tim raked Snider's great carcass with his boot, then waited till the man rose, and sent in a smashing left to the belly that doubled Snider up. Then, as Snider straightened, Tim brought up his right in a short jab to the jaw, giving it all he had. Snider crashed back into the midst of the spectators, and brought up against the wall.

Tim followed, giving Snider no rest. He showered his blows to face and belly, until a groan like that of some wounded monster came from Snider's lips, and the gross frame slumped and collapsed into a pool of beer and fragments of broken glass.

Just for a moment there was an awed silence in the barroom. It was plain that Snider had never been whipped before. And then suddenly the whole interior went screaming mad, and rushed Tim, swinging their guns.

Tim saw Snead drawing on him in the crowd, rushed him, and kicked Snead head over heels into a corner, the weapon flying from his hand. But Tim stood absolutely alone, and it was only the madness of the mob that halted their efforts to get at him. Yells and curses assailed him. He butted his way into the struggling vortex, trying to make the door. He was fighting with his left hand and trying to draw his gun with his right, but so intense was the pressure of the crowd that he was unable to reach his holster. They were kicking, striking, howling like a madman.

Something hard crashed upon Tim's head from behind and he felt his knees begin to buckle. He was slipping but he managed to find the wall, and leaned back against it. And now he had his gun in hand and was facing the howling pack, and it looked like the end for him.

Then, a big man wearing a star was coming through the door, covering the snarling mob with his gun; and with swimming eyes, Tim recognized Ben Clark, who had been a deputy in the old days. Big, quiet, stolid Ben.

"What's happening, gents?" he asked, when he calmed the mob.

Snead yelled: "Tim Harrigan! He came back fightin' drunk, and beat up Snider! Tried to tear the whole place apart. You put him in the jug, Ben!"

Ben waived his hand tolerantly and turned to Tim. "Why, lad, it's good to see you again," he said. Then to the others. "Now easy with him, fellers." He waited for disapproval but the crowd was silent. He looked at Tim once more. "You get on up and see your folks, Tim, and have a good sleep and quiet down."

Tim grinned crookedly, and stumbled out into the street.

CHAPTER II

A Warm Welcome

AT FIRST he thought the crowd outside had been drawn by the fracas in the saloon, but now he saw that this time he was not the center of attraction. A hair-pulling contest was going on between two women, and one of them was the girl whom Tim had seen with Sid

Roscoe, the lawyer, in the saloon.

"I'll teach you to make up to my man!" screamed one of the women, waving a hank of recently extracted hair and slapping the other's face. "You knew he was mine, you little cheap dance hall follower. Take that, and that!"

Cheers of encouragement came from the spectators as the vanquished girl ran sobbing into the dance hall. The victor stood in the street, glaring after her opponent.

"Miss Evans, Ma'am, permit me." That little man, bowing low with a sweep of his hat, was Tim's Wild Uncle Roche. A little, gentle man of about fifty, with soft brown eyes and an immense mustache, he seemed to be calming down the irate woman.

And Miss Evans, who was a not uncomely woman of about thirty years, burst into sobs, and Wild Uncle Roche took her by the arm and escorted her to the door if a shop across the street, that seemed to specialize in ladies' wear. The little man stood there respectfully until she had let herself in.

Meanwhile, the crowd seemed to have forgotten Tim, and he watched his uncle in some amusement. Wild Uncle Roche had obtained his soubriquet from some exploit in his youthful days, concerning which there was a good deal of mystery. He had never shown himself as anything but the mildest and most inoffensive of men, derived from the maternal stock and not from the Harrigans. Periodically, Wild Uncle Roche favored the Harrigans with a prolonged visit and this was evidently one of the times.

Returning from his mission with Miss Evans, he encountered Tim planted in the middle of the street, and seized his hand with a shout of enthusiasm.

"Sure, and it's good to see you, lad!" he said. "And it will be a glad sight for the old folks' eyes, for they've had their troubles. When I heard there was a hombre bustin' up the *Loving-Cup* I kind of guessed it might be you and I was comin' to help you."

"Is it true Dad's lost his ranch?" demanded Tim.

"Well, you might call it so—yes, that's a fact, Tim. Where's your hawss?"

Tim indicated it at the rack.

"Mine's over here. You get yours and I'll tell you what's been happenin', while we're riding back."

A minute later the two were riding side by side out of town in the direction of the range. It was not until they were clear of the town that Tim asked: "Larry's dead?"

"It's true," sighed Wild Uncle Roche. "And we've been waitin for you, day after day, hopin' You'd be comin' back to retrieve the honor of the Harrigans. Not that way, boy," he added as Tim was about to turn his horse along the well-remembered road running to his father's ranch-house. "Keep straight on."

"So Dad lost the ranch," said Tim. "Go ahead and just tell me all, Uncle Roche."

THE little man sighed. "Well, we lost everything. Saul Robbins foreclosed. Your pa sent Larry in to pay off the mortgage at the bank and he didn't come home. He was found dead next mornin', with the money gone—and that's all anybody knows. We're living in a shanty on the free range. The old sheriff died—you remember he was ailing—and Ben Clark's honest enough but he hasn't any brains."

"And who are all these strange punchers in town?"

"Well, as I was saying, Saul Robbins foreclosed, claimin' the money hadn't been paid. Your pa put up a fight, as befitted a Harrigan, but the old sheriff got a posse and ejected him, after a valiant struggle. That was nigh on six months ago."

Tim nodded and Wild Uncle Roche went on. "Saul Robbins moved in the old house and brought in a gang, and they're said to be rustlin' all over the State and selling across the border. Anyway, the whole range is stocked with Robbins' steers. And we got nothin', Nephew. Just settin', living off the little bit of money your pa saved in happier

days. Just settin' there and waiting for you to come home."

"Who's Snider?"

"Snider? He's the boss of the gang. He isn't too quick on the draw but he kin scare the vitals out of anybody he gets sore at. Don't you never stack up again Snider, unless you got a gun in your hand."

"I knocked out that hunk of ham tonight."

"You did?" Wild Uncle Roche turned in his hull. "So that was what all the uproar was about. Glory be, Nephew, it looks like you came home jest in time to set the Harrigans back on top of the heap again."

The blow caught the big man straight on the chin.

Tim smiled as the older man continued.

"Listen, Tim, it's plain enough Saul Robbins hired one of those thugs to kill Larry and git the mortgage back. And that Miss Evans—she knows something. She's more than hinted at it, at times when she's been sore on Lawyer Roscoe. You go see her and talk to her, Tim. She always had a kind of likin' for you, though between you me me, I'm thinking she prefers men of a more matoor age than you. Well, let's get goin' quick. There'll be a warm welcome waitin' for you at home."

The rising moon showed the old ranch-house on the left, across the range. Tim's heart sank within him at the realization that his home was lost, the home his dad had brought him to when he was a knee-high gassoon.

The Harrigans had always been a fighting family and their battles had not always been with the outside world alone, but deep in Tim's heart was unshaken love and loyalty for his folks—his dad and ma, his kid brother, Shane, and Larry—poor Larry treacherously murdered.

He vowed he'd never let up till he'd run his brother's killer to earth. But for the present he'd be content to see the old folks again and then hit the hay.

THEY had ridden about a mile beyond the road that led to the old ranch-house when the noise of clamorous voices over the range began to fill the air. Wild Uncle Roche turned in his saddle.

"Sure now, it sounds like your pa's in one of his argifyin' moods, but it must be good to hear the old folks' voices, Tim," he said.

They struck off across the range. This was free range, rough country overgrown with scrub mesquite, that had never been taken up, and here, nestling into the base of a craggy hill, Tim saw the outlines of a house, a black oblong with a light shining out of its center.

He was disheartened when, drawing rein outside, he saw the squalid outlines of the shack and the stable, little more than a lean-to, from which a horse neighed at the approach of the two riders. Inside the shack was a bellowing uproar, in which Tim could distinguish the voices of his father, his mother, and Shane; but his father's voice dominated the others both in volume and in intensity.

"Sure, now, we've come at a good time to be pouring oil upon the troubled waters," said Wild Uncle Roche as they dismounted, and flung their reins over the tie-rail. Wild Uncle Roche kicked open the sagging door and the two went inside.

Old Emmett Harrigan, his face blood red above the rim of his bristling gray beard, was shaking a furious fist at Shane, a youth of about eighteen, who stood facing him, a mocking smile upon his handsome face.

Shane shouted: "Sure I rode Bess into town and she picked up a calk, and she'd have done the same if *you'd* been riding her! I tell you that gang strewed our road with calks to lame her, and if you can't stand the truth, I'll get out like you told me to."

"You get to thunderation outer here and never let me see your face agen!" yelled Emmett.

He turned to stare at the newcomers, then recognized Tim, and a kind of sheepish look came over his face. Jane Harrigan, a matronly, gray-haired woman, who had been watching the scene from the entrance to what looked like the only other room in the shack, suddenly uttered a cry and came running forward. In a moment Tim was enfolded in a motherly embrace.

Glory be, I was afraid you'd never be comin' back, after the things your father said to you!" She sobbed. "Emmett, what are you gapin' at, you big goop? Don't you see your son's come home again?"

"Yeh, I see him," answered old Emmett, folding his arms across his chest. "And I guess I've got to thank you, Wild Uncle Roche, for dragging him in."

"Emmitt, have you taken leave of

your senses?" whispered his wife. "Is that a way to receive your son, when he comes home penitent and pleading. Is that the way?"

"I don't think I'm either penitent nor pleading!" Tim rasped. "I warned you to pull in your horns, instead of takin' out that mortgage, and now you've lost everything."

Emmett roared: "By the Great Horn Spoon, no son of mine is going to lay down the law to me! Git out of this house and never darken it again!"

"House?" Tim grinned. "Looks to me more like you've moved into a pigstye. And keep your fists to yourself, Dad. You tried that once before, if you'll remember."

"Emmett, don't beat up the lad again!" shrilled Jane, clinging to Tim. "Remember he's been away so long, and try to treat him decent."

Wild Uncle Roche said mildly: "You ought to calm that temper, Emmett. You're goin to get a stroke some day."

"And who are you to tell me if I'm to get a stroke or not?" roared Emmett. "Wild Uncle Roche! Huh! Wildest thing you ever did was talk! Git out of here, the whole pack of you, or I'll take my gun to yuh!"

Outside, a minute or two later, Jane Harrigan was saying: "If you boys ride away, I'll have nobody in the world except Emmett. He's crabby but he isn't bad, as yuh know, and he's had a lot of trouble, our being put outer our ranch after nigh on twenty years. And Larry . . . poor Larry—"

She began to cry.

"That's all right, Ma," said Tim, taking her in his arms.

"You three boys just wait a half hour, till he's gone to sleep, and then come in and I'll fix you some supper and beds. He'll be all right in the mornin'."

So the three milled around for half an hour, till raucous snores, which seemed to shake the entire flimsy structure that was now the Harrigan home, announced that all was—temporarily—peaceful.

CHAPTER III

Murder

SPEAKING in the dark, Wild Uncle Roche said: "Yeah I was a tur'ble fighting man in my younger days, but now thar's only one thing that can rouse the Roche sperrit in me and that's to see a woman abused. And when I think of that pretty, sweet, gentle young Miz Evans, throwing away her affections on that snake Sid Roscoe, it makes my blood bile."

He spat. "But she's getting wise to his goin's on with that dance hall girl, that only wants his money. Miz Evans's getting wise enough to spill what she knows about who killed Larry and got the mortgage away from him after he collected it at the bank. Only yuh see, Tim, you, having jest come back and having always been Miz Evans' favorite, you got to strike while the iron's hot, and kind of surprise her into tellin'."

"Yeh, I'll ride into town tomorrow," said Tim sleepily.

"Reckon I'll go with you, Tim," said Shane. "My days here with the old man are numbered. His temper's gittin' him down so fast, there's no livin' with him."

"I'll throw my own rope," answered Tim shortly. "If I needed a partner, there's nobody I'd rather have than you. But we're the only two Harrigans remaining, Shane and it looks to me like two of us will be one too many for the work that's coming."

And obstinately closing his ears to Shane's remonstrances, Tim fell asleep.

In the morning old Emmett seemed to have experienced a change of heart. "I guess I'm a hot-tempered old fool, Tim," he explained apologetically. "It's the loss of Larry that's got yore ma and me down."

"You sent him in to pay off the mortgage?" asked Tim.

"Yeh, enough money to pay it off in full, and he was to bring it back, and a bank receipt. He was found dead in the scrub next mornin', and not a penny or a paper on him."

Emmett's face soured with the memory.

"Saul Robbins always wanted my ranch, and that snake Sid Roscoe wuz working with him. Between them, they planned the killin' of Larry and they're trying to hound me off the free range."

"Don't worry, Pa, I'm going to look into it," said Tim.

"But don't you git rubbed out like Larry," cautioned his father. "That would leave me only Shane. He's a good boy, but powerful ornery at times. But I dunno what you kin do, alone. Maybe we could work out something together."

"You leave it to me," said Tim, though he couldn't see exactly what he was going to do.

But Tim remembered Shane's last warning, to look out for calks, and it proved justified; for the road had been strewn with them for a distance of some two hundred yards. Tim rode his horse along the edge, then settled into a steady lope for Tumbleton. It was about the middle of the afternoon and the little town was just waking up after the drowsy period of the day. Tim got down outside the bank, and walked inside.

A sleepy cashier was yawning behind the grill, and old Saul Robbins was at his desk in his little office, visible through the open door.

PAUNCHY, with his white whiskers and bald forehead, he looked just the same—just as bland and reptilian as always. Tim had never liked Robbins, since the banker had swindled him out of half his promised pay for shoveling snow for him, ten years before.

A fat smile creased the banker's face when he saw Tim. "Well, Timothy Harrigan, welcome home!" he exclaimed, extending a chubby hand, which Tim took reluctantly and dropped like a dead fish. "And what do you propose to do with yourself, young man, now that you're back in Tumbleton?"

"Kill snakes," said Tim. "There seems to be a powerful lot of sidewinders around here since I went away."

"Young man," said the banker pompously, "I don't understand your words, but your manner is objectionable and my time is valuable. Kindly state your business and leave."

"Straight to the point," said Tim. "My business—first to get that mortgage that was stolen from my brother's body, and to find the skunk who murdered him; second, to find the human coyote who gave orders for Larry's killing; third, to stretch some strong new hemp—"

"Oyens! Oyens! Come in here, quick!" bawled the banker.

The cashier was inside the office in a moment, his gun held in a not very steady hand and aimed at Tim's chest. Tim, without troubling to draw, continued quietly: "To sum up, Robbins, I want that mortgage and the ranch you stole, and then I want justice on your fat—"

Ben Clark was coming in, good old steady Ben Clark. Robbins shouted: "Lock him up, Marshal! He's been threatening and abusing me. I want him locked up immediately!"

"Yeh, I saw him in town and figured he mightn't have got rid of all that liquor he had yesterday," answered Ben. "But ten days in the hoosegow is the limit yuh can sentence him to, Mr. Robbins. Yuh want me to take him over to Red Valley for trial on them charges you were specifyin'?"

"No, get him out of here. See that I'm protected. That's what you were elected for, isn't it? If ever he comes into this bank again I'll prosecute him to the limit."

Outside, Ben Clark shook a warning finger at Tim. "Feller, you've been cuttin' a swath since yuh rode in last night," he said. "How come yuh been so brash? Sure, Saul got your dad's ranch, but thar's no proof he was at the back of your brother's killin'. Yuh got to keep the peace. Last night you beat up Snider and raised cain in the *Loving-Cup*. It's my duty to purtect the town against tough lobos like you."

Tim grinned. Big Ben Clark and he had always been on good terms. "Talk

When Tim entered he knew the lawyer was dead. He was slumped over the desk.

sense, Ben," he said. "You know Saul Robbins didn't dare send me over to Red Valley to be tried, for fear of certain facts coming out. And how about the tales of rustling?"

"That isn't my province. I'm only the town marshal. Outside the town limits it's up to the Red Valley sheriff. And I ain't no politician, Tim. I may have my own ideas but ideas don't count in law. There ain't no evidence to show who killed your brother. But you watch your step because I'd say your life is worth jest about as much as a steer's when

he's on his way to Kansas City. And there's nothin' I can do unless I git proof of violations."

Tim nodded, and parted from the big man. It was beginning to grow dark now. He crossed the street to the ladies' shop, with the idea of carrying out Wild Uncle Roche's suggestion that he have a talk with Miss Evans.

THE shop was closed. There was no sign of the woman, and Tim was turning away when a girl came hurriedly across the street toward him, and he recognized the one Sid Roscoe had been with in the dance-hall the night before. Two long scratches on one cheek gave token to the quarrel with Miss Evans.

"I know why you're in town!" said the girl breathlessly. "I know who killed Larry. Everybody knows but there's no proof! It was Saul Robbins' crowd."

"Well, I kind of guessed that," said Tim.

"Sid Roscoe's got something on Saul Robbins. Maybe it's the proof. He was boasting about it to me, the dirty four-flush. He was telling me he's got Saul where he wants him and that Snead and Snider are eating out of his hand. You go and make him tell you what he knows."

"You and Sid Roscoe don't appear to be too harmonious," suggested Tim.

"What, that snake? He's made a fool of me and that poor Miss Evans, who was crazy enough to assault me in the street yesterday. As if I want her leavings! Huh!"

"You don't know where Miss Evans is?"

"No, and I don't care. I guess that woman can look out for herself."

"Is Roscoe still living in his office?"

"Yes, and if you're going to pay him a visit, give him a kick from me."

After the dance hall girl left him, Tim decided that there was no hurry. From the Chinese restaurant that had been opened since he went away, he could keep watch on the street, in case Roscoe made his appearance. It would be best to intercept him after dark.

Meanwhile he tucked away a meal of chop suey under his belt, washed it down with two cups of coffee, and felt more comfortable.

It was quite dark when he went out. The dance hall was beginning to open up. There sounded the tinkle of pianos and the wail of violins, the laughter of the percentage girls, and the loud voices of the customers. The click of the ubiquitous roulette ball began to punctuate all the sounds of the street.

This was the time to see Roscoe, and Tim meant business. He was convinced from his talk with the girl that Sid Roscoe was in possession of the stolen mortgage.

He went to Roscoe's office at the end of the business block, at the opposite end from the bank, and climbed the stairs. He remembered the lawyer's office and rapped on the door. He could see a light under the door but there came no answer, and Tim tried the handle, found the door was unlocked, and walked in.

Tim had been inside Roscoe's office only once before. This small, empty anteroom, with just a chair and a table, was used as a clerk's office. Miss Evans, Tim recalled, used to help out the lawyer sometimes, in the old days.

Tim could see Roscoe sitting in his inner office, which looked in complete confusion. Letter files had been dragged from shelves, and the floor was littered with paper. The desk itself looked as if a cyclone had caught it.

All that was strange enough but stranger still was the attitude of the lawyer, slumped over his desk, his desk, his fingers still clutching a gun, and before Tim entered the inner room he knew that Roscoe was dead.

CHAPTER IV

Escape

TIM saw the trickle of blood upon the floor before he saw the knife between Roscoe's shoulders, stuck in up to the hilt. A trickle of blood had flowed around it, staining the back of the coat

and seeping down upon the desk. The face of the dead man was sallow, sinister, sneering, like that of a dead wolf, and there was a look of surprise upon it, as if the lawyer hadn't quite known what was happening to him when the point of the blade went into his heart.

He must have died instantly, apparently in the act of levelling the gun, which he had drawn from an open right-hand drawer of his desk. He hadn't been dead more than a few minutes, for the cheek that Tim reluctantly laid a finger to was still warm.

The killer had done the ransacking, for there was blood all over the scattered papers.

Tim began searching frantically among them, and almost at once he saw what he wanted. On the floor, almost at the feet of the dead man, was an envelope, marked HARRIGAN—MORTGAGE. The envelope had fresh bloodstains on it and also had the marks of old bloodstains, which told their tale. And it was empty.

A slight sound behind him made Tim whirl. Big Ben Clark was standing in the doorway, covering Tim with his six-gun.

"Hold them high and steady, Tim," he said, "and don't start anything. I'm aimin' to get you into a snug cell in the Red Valley hoosegow before Saul's waddies git to know what you've done, or you'll be cottonwood tree fruit inside of half an hour. They got steel cages over in Red Valley and yuh'll feel comfortable there."

Tim shouted: "You fool, Ben, I found Sid lying here not more than a minute ago! Somebody else killed him. Haven't you got any judgment? What brought you in here anyways?"

Ben said: "I've been on yore trail ever since you left the bank after threatening Mr. Robbins, Tim. You had a wild look in yore eye which I didn't like, and I guessed you were plannin' mischief, which same it wasn't difficult to figure out. You thought Sid Roscoe had some papers that would throw light on that mortgage of yore dad's, and so you knifed him and then raansacked this office. Kind of a desperate haste yuh must have been in, seein' the mess you made. Hoist them quick, Tim, and stop tryin' to palaver. I'd sure hate to have to shoot you."

"For friendship's sake, have a little sense, Ben!" shouted Tim. "Don't yuh see Saul Robbins was afraid of being double-crossed by Roscoe, as soon as he knew I was on the prod? He sent a feller here to get that mortgage! Sid reached for his gun and the feller knifed him. Isn't it all as plain as Pike's Peak to yuh?"

BEN CLARK'S answer came in a leap, surprisingly quick for so heavy a man. His gun cracked sideways against Tim's skull.

Tim had just time to avoid the full force of the blow but it staggered him, and sent him to one knee. He felt Ben's grip on the back of his shirt. The room was swimming about him. He was nearly out and he knew it.

And then suddenly another figure hurled itself at them from the little room beyond. It landed squarely on Ben's shoulders and both men went to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs.

Tim precipitated himself into the midst of the mix-up and grabbed Ben's hand just as the marshal's gun went off. Ben managed to fire three times but ineffectively, before Tim had wrenched the gun out of his hand and sent it flying across the room. Then he joined the other man in getting Ben down.

And half-dazed as he was from the blow that the marshal had given him, Tim recognized that Ben Clark's assailant was Shane, his kid brother. And Shane was fighting with all the savageness of the Harrigans when they were aroused.

The lamp went crashing to the floor, leaving the room in darkness, save for the saloon lights across the way. Shane had Ben by the throat but the marshal was putting up a hard fight, and his yells must have been audible at the

other end of the business block.

"Ben, I have to do it, yuh old catamount—you never did have sense," grunted Tim, as he edged into the battle. And, gripping his six-gun carefully, so that the sight shouldn't infli t a cut, Tim delivered a wallop just above one ear that instantly cut off Ben's voice into a strangled grunt. The struggling limbs relaxed. Ben Clark was cold meat for the time.

Tim straightened himself. He was feeling almost all right again.

"What are you doin' here, when I told you I was swingin' my own rope?" he demanded of his brother. "I've a good mind to take you across my knee liked I used to, when you was a shaver! Here are the last two of the Harrigans and a fine mess we're in."

"Take me across yore knee? Why, you lop-eared yaller coyote, I can lick the daylights outer you!" roared Shane. "Come on! Put up yore fists, you hydrophoby skunk!"

But shouts sounded below and footsteps on the stairs arrested the dispute effectively.

Tim hurled himself at the outer door and turned the key in the lock. It was a moderately strong door but it didn't look as if the lock would hold for more than a few seconds. A body jarred against it and a voice shouted: "Open up, whoever's there, in the name of the law! What's all that shootin'? This is Deputy Gregg!"

TIM darted back, past the body of Roscoe and the still form of Ben Clark, and beat out the window glass with his gun. There wasn't even time to open the window for the door was cracking under the impetus of the attack from without, and was likely to go at any instant.

Tim and Shane thrust their heads through the frame. There was a stable below and the jump was high enough to break a hombre's legs, only for a dark pile that looked like hay, heaped up against the wall immediately beneath the window.

"Follow me," said Tim, and letting himself out, he dropped, as he had expected, on the soft mass, from which he quickly disengaged himself as Shane came hurtling down beside him.

Overhead a thunderous crash announced that the door had given away. Tim and Shane picked themselves up and raced down the narrow alley that led from the stables to the heart of the town. Overhead voices were yelling and a shower of bullets peppered the wall beside them. Dogs barked, a woman screamed. And then the two were in Main Street, which was almost deserted except for the horses that lined it on each side, because the saloons and dance halls were already filling up.

"Git yore horse—meet me at the east end of the town!" gasped Tim.

"Where are we ridin' for?"

"Anywhere out of the hangman's rope. If we can make the canyon country east of the town, we can hole up there till we got time to think. They'll never find us in the dark."

"My mare's lame but she can run all right," said Shane.

"Get goin' then and meet me there inside of two minutes, because by then Tumbleton will be boilin' over."

Already, in fact, this short and furious colloquy had been punctuated by a fresh outburst of yelling. The party of Deputy Gregg had discovered the route of the fugitives and were coming on, full blast. A roar of guns and a further unwelcome hail of lead, this time accurately directed, indicated that the two fugitives were sighted.

Glancing back, Tim saw the deputy's party coming quickly along the alley, having evidently left the building by the same method that Shane and he had employed. What saved the two fugitives was the outpouring of men from the saloons along the street, quickly jamming it and forming an effective barrier for Gregg's party.

Tim found his horse outside the bank and in a moment had it untied, and was in the saddle before his movements had become visible again.

But now a fresh mob came streaming out of the *Loving-Cup,* and at their head Tim saw the monstrous form of Snider.

Seen at the bar the night before, the man had appeared merely huge of girth and build, but now, in the open, his legs looked like two cylinders supporting a barrel, so that he came waddling forward like some obscene monstrosity. Behind him, in the bright light streaming out of the dance hall Tim recognized Snead, the foreman, and several faces who laughed the previous night.

They yelled recognition and a shower of ill-directed slugs came in Tim's direction. He felt his horse quiver as if struck, and at the same time felt a sting below the knee. He reached down quickly, and felt the edge of a slight cut. He turned and loosed his six-gun into the crowd, heard howls of pain, saw a man stumble, and grinned as the whole mob flattened itself upon the ground or ducked back into the saloon.

Behind him the street was impassable with a milling crowd of men and rearing horses. In front, the street was clear. Tim bent over the bay's neck, kicked it in the flanks and shot like an arrow through the town to the east end.

There, to his joy, he saw a shadowy figure scrambling into its hull, and recognized his brother.

"You must have run like all hades, Shane," Tim said.

"Looks like we have to ride like all-fire combustion now," said Shane, as he kicked his horse.

Already some of their pursuers were mounted and working through the crowd. A chorus of baying yells pursued the Harrigans as they dashed along the road toward the canyon country. Here, broken, scrub-covered ground stretching upward to the foothills would enable them to shake off their pursuers and hole up.

"Is your mare lame?" asked Tim, noticing the peculiar gait of his brother's mount.

He raised the muzzle to the monster's head, and pulled.

"That's Bess. She stepped on a caulk. That's how the old jasper and me tangled first time yesterday. But she'll make it."

Despite her injury, Bess was keeping pace with the bay. Looking back, in the light of a newly risen moon, Tim could see the shadowy mass of their pursuers a long distance behind them, but their yells were blended with the indefinite sounds of the night. Occasionally a rifle shot sounded but no slug came near the two.

Now they were striking through the scrub. An hour later they drew rein in the canyon. On either side arose

precipitous walls and above them was the stony flank of a mountain ridge, covered with pine scrub. For the present they were safe.

CHAPTER V

Saul's Lair

TIM asked: "Have you eaten lately?"

"Yeah, I have a coupla sandwiches in my pocket. Here."

"You keep them. You're going to want them, maybe. I've just eaten. Why did you follow me when I told yuh not to?"

Shane grinned sourly. "Like a dog follows when he's got no home," he answered. "Pa went on the prod after you left, sayin' how you were goin' to get rubbed out by Saul Robbins and how you was the last of the Harrigans, because I didn't count for anything. That started Ma cryin', and when Pa took his strap to me I socked him and walked out. And I took Bess. She's lame but I had to have a hoss to follow you. I was scared you'd be rubbed out before I got thar."

He gulped, and went on.

"And Wild Uncle Roche came with me. He had some words with Pa, and Pa threw him through the winder. Say, I wonder how Uncle got his name? I never saw no wildness in him, except maybe at feeding time. But he quit me."

"How do you mean, Shane?"

"Why, as soon as we hit town, he started inquiring after that Evan's female, and somebody told him she'd jest left town along the west road, and was ridin' kind of quick. Wild Uncle Roche was afraid she was goin' to kill herself on account of her having been turned down by Sid Roscoe, so he started after her without stoppin' to do any explaining."

"Huh, things certainly are mixed up," said Tim. "How come you were in Roscoe's front room? You didn't see who killed him?"

"No, I was right on your heels, Tim. I saw yuh go in and slipped upstairs after you. Then Ben Clark came and didn't see me in the dark. And yuh know the rest. I sure thought it was you who killed Sid Roscoe."

"Look, Shane, I went to see Saul Robbins and demanded that mortgage, which was a fool trick, I'll admit. Then that dance hall girl, who Sid was thick with, put me wise. Sid had got hold of the mortgage and was blackmailing Saul Robbins. So, after I threw a scare into Saul, he sent a hombre to kill Sid and get the paper. That hombre carried out his orders. He got the mortgage because I saw the empty envelope. That mortgage is at Saul's ranch-house. And we're going to git it."

"Talk sense, Tim. Saul's got a couple of dozen hombres at his ranch."

"No, most of them are sousing in the *Loving-Cup* and the rest of them are tailin' us through the scrub. That's what was in my mind when I said the east end of town, Shane, to draw them off the trail. We'll make a detour and we'll catch Saul with only two or three of his crowd, and most of them pickled."

"Hell's bells, won't Pa be pleased, the old crab!" said Shane.

THEY got their horses and made a wide detour through the scrub at the base of the foothills. Far off, across the flats, they could see the lights of Tumbleton twinkling like a bunch of fireflies in the void, but no sound came to them. There was no evidence of pursuit.

Tim said: "If my surmise is correct, those fellers don't want us. We're the last hombres in the world they want to see again. They've rubbed out Sid Roscoe, and Saul's got back the mortgage, which he's no doubt destroyed, and if they never set eyes on us again, they won't be cryin'."

"Yeh, but if Saul's destroyed the mortgage, what can we prove and how can we prove it?" demanded Shane.

Tim tapped his holster. "We'll catch the old skunk alone, he'll talk plenty, and write plenty, if we promise him immunity," he said. "Anyhow, it's our

only chance and the situation isn't too bad."

As they skirted the town, they could very faintly hear the sound of carousing coming from it, indicating that Saul's waddies were not likely to be on the job when Saul was going to want them. Beyond the town, where the land became more rugged, the old house loomed up suddenly across the range.

Tim felt a throb of homesickness in his veins. That house had been his home; it had meant everything to him in the days when there had been the three boys together, Larry, Tim, and Shane, and the old man hadn't been so cranky then, even if there had been an occasional free-for-all.

As they drew nearer, they could see a light in one window. Nearby was the lighted bunkhouse, the outbuildings, including the small stone structure now falling into ruin that Emmett Harrigan had built for their original home when he came into the country and took up land.

He had been a stonemason in boyhood and prided himself on that home, built of stone cut and carted from the hills, but the roof had been blown off in a twister and the Harrigan family had moved into the commodious wood and adobe structure now occupied by Robbins.

Skirting the bunkhouse cautiously, the two brothers heard voices within but there were no signs of activity. Probably some of the waddies who were off duty and taking it easy.

Tim and Shane alighted in a clump of mesquite at the rear of the stables and tied their horses. Then they approached the ranch-house afoot.

The kitchen at the rear was dark and only a faint light was reflected from the living-room in front. Softly Tim threw up the kitchen window and the two climbed through.

They were moving toward the door when Shane stumbled over the soft, yielding object that leaped away with a terrified screech—a cat. Reaching out to save himself, Shane brought down a clatter of plates and dishes that smashed upon the floor with enough noise to wake the Seven Sleepers.

There came a roar and flash of yellow flame through the crack of the door leading into the passage, and a slug fanned Tim's cheek. At the same time there sounded the excited chatter of the Chinese cook as he fired wildly into the door; then, as Tim and Shane broke through, the cook dashed along the hall and vanished through the kitchen door.

SAUL ROBBINS was standing in the doorway of the living-room. A heavy old man, on his feet, and wearing his flowered dressing-gown. In fact, with his white whiskers, he looked like a sort of benevolent patriarch.

Tim and Shane gestured him inside and he retreated, his mouth open, terror in his eyes.

"You know what we came for," said Tim. "You hand over that mortgage and yore wretched life won't be our concern. But you got to be quick."

"I—I haven't got it," stammered Saul Robbins. "I swear I haven't seen it since—"

"Yeah, since when? Since the night yore man murdered my brother Larry. A life for a life, Saul Robbins—but I'm goin' to give you a chance to make yore getaway if you hand over that cancelled mortgage pronto."

"I swear I don't know where it is." Even with Tim's and Shane's guns covering him, Saul Robbins couldn't be broken. There was a sort of sincerity in his voice, too, that held the Harrigans from shooting.

"I handed that mortgage back to Larry," the old man was babbling. "It was Sid Roscoe who had him ambushed, without my knowing anything about it. It was Sid who got the mortgage and the receipt for the payment. He held it over my head ever since—"

"You're lying, you snake," said Tim, but without conviction. "Even if what you say is true, you got the money for the cancellation."

"Sid Roscoe got that too. I tell you he's made my life a hell all these past

five years. He—he had something on me. He made me do what he said. He was working with Snead and—"

"Listen!" Tim tapped the old man, none too gently, on the head with his gun-muzzle. "You know you had Sid Roscoe killed this afternoon. You know the killer got the mortgage. Because I found the empty envelope on the floor of his office. What have you got to say about that?"

"It wasn't my doing," babbled Robbins. "I don't know anything about it."

"What do you say, Shane, shall we rub him out?" asked Tim. "Looks like he won't talk."

"Yeah, I'm for killing sidewinders, on principle," Shane replied.

"Here's your last chance to talk, Robbins, and to talk fast," said Tim.

But at that moment there came a sudden rush from the front door and bright tongues of flame lit up the darkness.

Tim felt the acute agony of a red-hot wire bore through his arm. Instinctively he dropped and Shane and he let loose a blast that sent the attackers scurrying out into the night, leaving two of their number threshing and moaning in the hall. Tim yelped, "You aren't hit, Shane? Let's go!"

They raced toward their horses. No use to try to follow up their plans now, with Saul's men on the prod, and Saul determined to wipe out the younger generation of the Harrigan family.

They could hear Saul yelling to his waddies as the two brothers raced through the night, punctured with leaden missiles and illumined by stabbing flame.

As they ran they reloaded; twice Tim and Shane turned and let loose a salvo that checked the rush. They were almost clear when fresh yells from in front of them announced that Saul's men had found the two horses.

That seemed like the end. Tim gripped Shane by the shoulders. "You darned fool kid," he whispered huskily. "If ever I git out of this I'll larrup the life out of you. The old man should have had sense enough to keep you home."

The moon was under a cloud; it was dark there, inside the large square formed by the ranch-house, the bunkhouse, the stable, and the little stone house that had been the original Harrigan home. The attackers were yelling savagely all around the perimeter, but fearing to come too close. An occasional shot whistled past but Saul's men were feeling their way, trying to make sure of Tim's and Shane's exact location before they closed in for the kill.

Suddenly Tim whispered: "The old stone house, kid. That's where we played —remember? That's where we'll hold them off. As long as our ammunition lasts, anyway."

They dashed toward the building. Seen as they raced through the dark, they were the targets for another volley. Shane stumbled and cursed. "Get on, Tim," he muttered, as his brother caught him. "It's only my leg. I'll make it—"

Tim gripped Shane about the body and, half dragging, half carrying him, pulled him inside the stone structure, while the slugs sputtered like hailstones on the walls about their ears.

CHAPTER VI

At Bay

THE interior was piled high with stones that had fallen from the upper walls, and the door was gone, leaving a wide entrance. It was nothing but a ruin but it afforded a temporary defense. The walls were still too high to climb, the single window was too small to enter, there was no way of burning out the defenders. Only by that wide door, through which a cart might have passed, was attack possible.

The yells of Saul's men indicated that the location of the two were known. The attackers drew off. Voices grew mute. Evidently a discussion was in progress.

Meanwhile Tim began gathering and rolling some of the fallen stones toward the door to form a barricade. Within a minute or two, by working furiously, he

had created one knee-high, sufficient protection for two men lying on their faces, to hold off a considerable force.

Then he turned to Shane, who had been cursing softly at his side. "You hit bad, kid?" he asked.

"No, nothing. How about you?"

"Me? I got one through the arm but the bone isn't broken. Guess it's stopped bleedin'. Let me see yore leg."

He felt in the darkness, heard Shane's moans of pain. It seemed as if the shin was smashed; it felt like an ugly wound, but at least it wasn't dangerous.

"Well, when Pa built this house, carting the stone clear from the foothills, I guess he didn't foresee that it would be the grave of the last of the Harrigans," grinned Shane.

"Grave nothing," said Tim. "We'll hold them off till hell's froze solid. How many cartridges do you have?"

"I have a box."

"I have a box too. Plenty, kid. You ate them sandwiches yet?"

"I ate them riding over. Why? You hungry?"

"Not yet, but I have a hunch we may be kind of empty before this job's through. Listen! They're goin' to try their luck. Keep your head down and hold your fire till you can't miss them."

But it was Robbins' voice that came out of the darkness. "Harrigan! You boys! Let's call it off. We don't want to shoot you. Come back to the house and let's talk like friends, putting our cards on the table."

"Yeah, on one condition, Robbins," answered Tim.

"What's that? I can't hear you very well. Will you swear not to fire if I come closer?"

"The condition is, you walk in here and we'll talk nice and friendly, settin' on three blocks of stone. You rat, you'd lie to a Harrigan!"

Tim's gun, exploding into the darkness, was answered by a scared yelp and the sound of stumbling feet. There ensued a savage fusillade. Slugs chipped the stone walls and sent fragments flying, and impinging against the protective boulders, but there was no shot fired in return.

MINUTES were crawling past; an eerie silence had fallen, while the two brothers strained their eyes into the darkness.

Suddenly there came another voice. Tim recognized it as that of Snead, the foreman.

"You two hombres come out peaceful and you won't be harmed," it said. "You haven't got a chance in thar. The sheriff's coming for you both, with a warrant for the killing of Sid Roscoe, and the town's gittin' up a lynching posse. If you come out peaceful, Mr. Robbins guarantees you a fair trial and—"

Again the dark was alighted with flame as, with savage yells, the waddies flung themselves at the entrance. So swift was the attack, so dark the night had grown, that they were almost near the breastwork before they could be seen.

There was a tense half-minute of flaming guns and charging bodies, the acrid stench of burning powder. Tim saw a wiry form hurl itself at him, felt a stabbing pain in his shoulder, emptied his last shell into the body of Snead, The foreman dropped cursing and moaning, across the barricade.

Tim raised Snead and hurled him back onto the other side. Now he saw Shane beside him on one knee, busily recharging. "You all right, kid?" Tim whispered.

"I think I stopped one with my head," said Shane. "Leastwise, I kin feel blood dripping. But they haven't explored the Harrigan brains yet."

Outside, the night was sour with the moaning of wounded men. It wasn't possible to see clearly but something like a half a dozen dark forms were moving around. Oaths and curses came back to the defenders.

"We held them. They won't try it again, Shane," said Tim hoarsely. He could feel the blood seeping into his shirt from his wounded shoulder. Every-

thing was growing confused.

He pulled himself together. If Shane and he could hold out till daylight, surely help would come from somewhere. Saul Robbins couldn't get away with cold-blooded murder . . . .

There came the crash of stones falling from the top of the wall. One of them rebounded, sending Tim sprawling. And with the stones something else had fallen—some monstrous thing that had the smell of an animal, yet bellowed out a blast of human obscenity as it came blundering forward.

A spurt of fire hissed in an orange stream past Tim's face. Tim's trigger clicked on a spent cartridge. Madly he reached up to grapple with this new assailant and recognized, by instinct rather than vision, Snider.

It was by sheer luck that Tim grabbed the gun before Snider could fire again, and the slug exploded harmlessly at Tim's feet. He heard the click of Snider's trigger and knew Snider's gun was empty too. The barrel whizzed past Tim's face and glanced off his wounded shoulder, causing him almost to faint with the pain. And then the monster had grasped him, was clawing and raking him, its fetid breath in Tim's face, while a stream of profanity poured from its lips.

Beside him, Tim heard Shane crying. Shane couldn't help him—Shane must have been struck down. Tim realized that he would have to put forth every effort if he was to overcome Snider.

It was during the attack by the others that Snider must have scaled the wall. Tim's gun was gone now, and he was pummelling the gross creature in the face, exactly as the night before in the *Loving-Cup*. But now Tim's strength was failing fast.

SNIDER'S huge hands were about his throat. Snider seemed absolutely oblivious to the blows that Tim rained on him. He was throttling Tim, but he was doing more than that. If he had shifted those claws a few inches further, Tim would have been instantly unconscious. But Snider was trying to break his neck. He was bending it back, back—

All consciousness was fading out, the black void was shot through with a myriad golden stars. That pain that had crept into the innermost corners of Tim's being was being blotted out too. Then Tim felt something in one dangling hand, one nerveless hand that seemed hardly to be part of him, and he heard Shane's voice coming from the ground: "Shoot, Tim, shoot!"

Tim felt his will power run like fibres of steel down the palsied nerves of his hand. He felt the fingers tighten on the grip of the gun. Some force within him stronger than himself was animating that right hand of his. Even as he heard his breath being hissed out in labored gasps under the grip of the monster, he raised the muzzle to Snider's head and pulled the trigger.

Snider shook as if tensed by a high voltage current. And suddenly the creature's grip relaxed and he dropped, inanimate, upon the floor of the hut. And Tim collapsed across the still quivering body.

Tim was out now, quite out and helpless—yet not so completely out but that he could hear a renewed outburst of shouting and the crackle of gunfire. He moved his hand with the instinct of protecting Shane. But he couldn't find Shane. This was the end, then. This was the end of the Harrigans . . .

Then fog was fading. Consciousness was coming back. He was lying out under the stars and the figures of men were moving about him.

"Shane!" he called weakly.

"I'm here, Tim, glory be. They got here in the nick of time, Tim."

"You're doing fine," said a voice that Tim recalled with something like shame. It was big Ben Clark's. "We've patched up you and Shane and we're taking you into town, soon as the doc's finished patchin' up some of Saul's boys—the ones that aren't dead."

"Yeah, but—" Tim's voice faltered. "How did you get here? And who killed

Sid Roscoe? Do you still say it was me, you lunkhead?"

"No, Snead confessed before he died. Roscoe hired him and another hombre to bump off Larry and git the mortgage. Roscoe had something on Robbins and he blackmailed him for years. Saul's signed a full confession. And we got the mortgage."

"You got it? Then Saul had it all the time?"

"No. The fact is, it was Miz Evans who killed Roscoe when he threatened her with his gun. She knowed he had that mortgage and she meant to give it to you, but she was plumb scairt and tried to make her getaway out of town. It was your Wild Uncle Roche who rode after her and persuaded her to come back. And say, they named him good, that hombre. He always seemed like a quiet, inoffensive feller to me but it was all I could do to hold him back when I brung the posse here to clean up those varmints."

"Well, I used to be ter'ble wild in the old days," said a well-remembered voice, "but now it takes a woman being abused to rouse the fightin' Roche spirit in me."

"By the Great Horn Spoon!" bellowed a still more familiar voice—Emmett Harrigan's. "The Roches don't have the fightin' spirit of a louse. Don't you talk back to me! I never asked yuh to darken my doorway. Wild Uncle Roche! Huh! Spirit means Harrigan, and us Harrigans stand together!"

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We know that you're not looking for advice. Still, once in a while it falls in the class of a hot tip: Naturally you would not roll a quirly over your beer—beer's too hard to get! But you might pass up the opportunity if we didn't remind you to look for this magazine.

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Did you get the tip? Okay, now don't miss getting what the newsdealers label one of the most popular detective magazines on the stands—PRIVATE DETECTIVE!

When a man quits the mountains for a more peaceful life with the promise never to return, it's difficult to pick up a gun and aim it at the heart of another man whose power is generally known. Yet that's what Ab had to do—with the knowledge that it meant destruction and that he'd bear the name of

LOCOED TRAPPER

THAT PAIR of gray squirrels had been bright-eyed and trusting. A single gunshot crashed. The heavy .45 lead left only bits of the two animals along the half-log step of the mountain cabin. "Told you I could nail 'em both at one crack! You owe me a dollar, Raner!"

"Sure, Biggs! And I said your itchin' trigger finger would bring somebody before we got these poles set!"

The shot in the evening silence of the clearing, and the hard voices, brought Ab Martin from the garden patch back of the cabin. He saw the hulking, gun-slung men who had called each other

By MAX NEILSON

Ab felt the floor swaying. There was more shooting but he couldn't raise his arm to shoot.

ILLUSTRATED BY JOSEPH SOKOLI

Raner and Biggs.

Ab Martin wore overalls and he was unarmed. One glance of his quick blue eyes told him what had happened. Even before he had sized up the two hawkish-faced gunhands, Ab Martin thought first of Mary and he was glad she had not been here to see the purposeless killing of the squirrels she had fed and petted for months until they had trusted all humans.

Ab Martin walked into view. Although he was in his twenties, his plain face had the marks of past hardship that made him seem older. He had been a mountain man, a trapper, but he had settled here more than a year before, homesteading this mesa of rich soil at the head of the long Job's Basin valley of ranches.

He had picked a good spot and he had earned the friendliness of his valley neighbors by the simple act of leaving open and fenceless the only cattle trail to market. His homesteading gave him the right to close it off but after he had sent for Mary and they had beeen married, Ab Martin had explained that having good neighbors meant much more than the ground taken up by the cow trail.

A quiet man, his face always appearing grayish, with a light beard, Ab Martin had been accepted as a friend by the peaceable folks of the valley. He was a plodder, and regarded as a man who had worked hard always and who would go a long way around any possible trouble.

The hawk-faced gunslingers were working with poles with which they had already cut off the cattle trail where it came onto Ab Martin's homestead from the Gunderson Y-B ranch. Martin had built his cabin where Mary had wanted

it, at the edge of their plot, with a sundown view of the long valley.

The gunhand who had killed the squirrels had made a good shot at the distance of several rods.

But Ab Martin didn't think about that. He could have come through the cabin when he had heard this pair of skulkers and armed himself with his .30-30, his only weapon.

He walked toward the men poling off the trail, with his hands empty. He realized this was a mistake but he had been thinking for the moment only of how he could tell Mary about the squirrels.

AB MARTIN halted a few yards from the two men.

"You hadn't ought to have killed them squirrels," he said quietly.

The gunhands guffawed loudly, one poking the other.

"You hear that, Biggs! A danged sodbuster always thinks he owns everything, includin' the varmints in the woods!"

Biggs was a trifle broader than the one called Raner. Both men had thumbs hooked in their gun belts as if this unarmed nester might suddenly start throwing lead.

Ab Martin's voice and the calmness of his blue eyes didn't change.

"You're doing another wrongful thing," he said slowly. "I don't savvy your idea but you're trespassin' on my land, and if those poles are being set to cut off the cow trail I'll have to take them up."

Raner and Biggs stared open-mouthed for several seconds.

"He's simple-minded like all mountain men!" rasped the bulky Biggs. "Supposin' you tell him what's what, Raner."

Raner grinned without humor. He said, "Feller, you can notice we're settin' a cutoff on the Gunderson Y-B and it ain't over your line. From now on all beef trailin' from Job's Basin is payin' off two dollars a head to pass through here to get to the shippin' rail end at Gunsight. Savvy?"

Ab Martin shook his head, glancing down the winding valley trail and hoping Mary wouldn't appear now in the evening sunset.

"You've made a mistake." His tone had the patience of a man who didn't quite understand. "John Gunderson and me give a free trail to more than twenty cowmen in Job's Basin. Gunderson would have told me if he was thinkin' of any change."

Both gunhands slapped their thighs and roared.

"Gunderson an' him!" mocked the taller Raner. "Reckon you ain't ever heard of King Lucas, feller?"

"I've heard of him," said Ab Martin. "Seen him once when I was in town. My neighbors don't think he'll be a good citizen for Paint Rock, seein' he fetched in a lot of riffraff since he took over the Trail Saloon. Don't go to town much myself and I don't drink in his place."

The gunhands punctuated Ab Martin's calm statement with hard oaths.

"If you're smart-minded you'll put a loop on your tongue, plow-pusher!" grated Raner, taking a step forward. "Maybe King Lucas 'll let you stay here to raise a crop but Gunderson has nothin' to say about the toll charges King is puttin' on this cow trail. Not no more he ain't."

"I'll see Gunderson and—" Ab Martin got no farther.

"Called us riffraff!" said Biggs harshly. "You talk too much, Raner, but this nester's got to get a lesson!"

Ab Martin saw Raner's hand close upon the butt of one of his two guns. The mountain man realized instantly he should have given more heed to some of the gunfights and other trouble he had heard talked about since King Lucas had landed in Paint Rock some six months before.

But more than a year of peace with good neighbors, and his own sticking to hard work on his place twenty miles from town had given Ab Martin the idea that the ruckusing had been caused by too much gambling by a few of the ranchers in the King Lucas saloon.

He hadn't expected any of this town trouble to touch him, as he was the only

farming homesteader in Job's Basin, and well liked. This sudden business of two tough gunnies visiting the edge of his cleared crop land, the brutal killing of Mary's pet squirrels, and what had been said about the cow trail was bewildering for the moment.

But Raner's menacing move toward his gun snapped Ab Martin back to his trapping days when he'd always been prepared for the sudden danger from killers on his trap lines, of both the four-legged wolves and the two-legged trap thieves.

Inwardly berating himself for stupidly appearing unarmed, Ab Martin sought to remedy his mistake. He dived into Raner with the quickness of a striking mountain cat, catching the gunhand unexpectedly in the stomach with his hard head and vising his strong fingers upon Raner's wrist.

He would have had Raner's gun, as the surprised hardcase hit on his back, the breath driven from his lungs.

But it was there that Ab Martin's belated resistance ended. He didn't see it but the barrel of the other gunhand's .45 crashed upon his skull.

The homesteader didn't know when the King Lucas hardcases mounted their horses and rode away. Raner retching and cursing, and Biggs rawhiding his gun pardner for talking too much.

IT was full dark and Mary had not returned from her visit to the Gundersons. Ab Martin had washed the cabin step.

He would not have worried now about Mary, it being full moonlight, if it had not been for the vicious attack of the two gunnies. Mary often visited with Mrs. Gunderson, an older woman, until after moonrise.

But when Ab Martin had made sure his round mountain hat concealed the gun welt along his skull, he saddled their other horse and rode down the valley trail.

Gunderson's Y-B spread was small and Gunderson ran only a few cows with the help of two half-grown sons. Mrs. Gunderson was a motherly woman and Ab Martin knew that this was a time when the older woman's advice would be helpful to Mary.

"If I tell John Gunderson what King Lucas' gunhands said, he'll be for startin' a bad ruckus," Ab Martin thought as he saw the lights of the Gunderson buildings.

Then he remembered something he had heard in town on one of his monthly trips for supplies. Maybe it was Taylor at the store, or Willard, another rancher with half a dozen cowhands, who had told it.

Ab Martin didn't put much stock in loose talk. But it had been said that John Gunderson had been gambling some in the Trail Saloon and had lost too much money to King Lucas.

Ab Martin didn't know why this came suddenly to his mind as he saw several horses and an unexpected group of valley men on the Gunderson porch. It was unusual, this being the haying season and the middle of the week.

As he dismounted, he looked through the open door off the porch. Mary was sitting beside motherly Mrs. Gunderson and had an arm around her.

Jim Saunders, owner of the biggest valley spread, met Ab Martin and told him about it.

"Young Bill Gunderson found his dad dead this afternoon, Martin," said Saunders heavily. "John had been in town and didn't come home last night. I guess maybe the talk of John Gunderson losin' his market money must be so. He'd shot himself with his own old gun and it was still in his hand."

Ab Martin's head still was aching but he remembered something that squirrel-killing gunhand had said:

"Gunderson has nothin' to say about the toll charges King Lucas is puttin' on this cow trail. Not no more he ain't."

SAUNDERS didn't add any more details to what he had told Ab Martin. Ab Martin saw that Willard, and Clem Young and three or four other ranchers were on the porch.

Saunders turned back to the other

cowmen while Ab Martin met Mary at the door.

"It's fitting I should stay with Mrs. Gunderson tonight, Ab," said Mary.

"It is, Mary," assented Ab Martin quietly, and he was glad he could put off telling her about the squirrels.

Ab Martin turned to his neighbors. They all greeted him but did not include him in their talk directly.

He listened some and learned that most of the ranchers were to hold a meeting at Taylor's store in Paint Rock the following night. He had heard there had been a few other meetings to discuss the fighting and trouble that had come to Job's Basin valley with the advent of King Lucas.

Sheriff Kent, an oldtimer, and Doc Robbins came from the house as Ab Martin pondered some on what the ranchers might be planning. Being a farming homesteader, Ab Martin had not been invited to any of the ranchers' meetings.

He had given no thought to this as the trouble brought by King Lucas apparently had affected only the owners of ranches.

Now Ab Martin heard Sheriff Kent telling the group of grave-faced men that Gunderson must have shot himself through remorse at having lost his money gambling.

"He'd put his own gun to his heart, and his shirt was burned from the powder," said Doc Robbins.

"I seen him ride out of town alone this morning," put in Sheriff Kent. "He'd been drinkin' a lot but he was settin' his horse all right. It was early and there wasn't any other riders about, not even any of the tough gents who've been hangin' around the Trail Saloon."

The ranchers muttered at that.

"We're havin' another meetin' tomorrow night, Sheriff," said Jim Saunders.

"I'll be there, Jim," said the sheriff. "But I found nothin' in any of the fightin' and other trouble that would put the law on King Lucas."

"Just the same," growled Jim Saunders, "there's been some stock run off and there's bad blood that's been stirred up by the King Lucas gambling."

Ab Martin might have spoken up then, but he hadn't been asked to any of the meetings. Pondering upon the sheriff and Doc Robbins evidently having accepted John Gunderson's suicide as proved, Ab Martin might have told how two King Lucas gunhands had appeared to know about Gunderson's death before Young Bill Gunderson had found his father.

But the mountain man figured that what he had experienced and what he had heard would be inconclusive as evidence to loop in a possible killer. Looking at the few ranchers who had gathered at the Gunderson place, Ab Martin noticed that only Jim Saunders had a belted gun.

Ab Martin wondered what had been talked over at their meetings and if any open threats had been made by King Lucas? Of one truth he was convinced, none of the riders for the valley irons was of the gun-slinging breed.

Ab had been a lone trapper. He had never pardnered in the Bitter Roots and he had quit the mountains for farming, chiefly because he had never become hardened to the killing of trapped and helpless beaver and otter and mink. He had been sure that Mary would not have wanted such a life.

The ranchers were leaving the Gunderson place with Sheriff Kent and Doc Robbins. Ab Martin called to Mary and talked for a few minutes.

"It'll be right for you to stay with Mrs. Gunderson until after the funeral," he told Mary. "I'll take your horse and drive to Paint Rock tomorrow for the month's supplies, then come back for you."

AB MARTIN apparently did not consider it worthwhile to tote his .30-30 with him to Paint Rock the next afternoon. He had an old Colt single-action revolver at home but its trigger spring was broken and he had not taken the trouble to have it repaired.

Ab didn't see it, but the barrel of the other's .45 hit Ab hard.

He had, when much younger, been handy with Colts.

Ab ate at the old Paint Rock hotel. During the evening he watched more than a score of ranchers gather at Sid Taylor's store, but he did not invite himself to the meeting.

He took note also that a dozen or more hard-faced gents with low-slung guns came and went from the King Lucas Trail Saloon up the street. He kept his eyes out for Raner and Biggs but did not see them in the street.

When the meeting at the store broke up, the valley ranchers mounted and rode away in pairs or small groups. Big Jim Saunders and Clem Young walked over to the hotel where Ab Martin was smoking his pipe.

Clem Young was wearing a gun but Saunders was not. Young was red-faced, fattish and excitable.

"Lucas has enough hired butchers to clean out our own peaceable riders, even if we do have the skunks outnumbered," said Clem Young as he came onto the hotel porch with Saunders. "Maybe if we do go into what Lucas calls a protective cow association we could get better market prices, but I'm against it."

Jim Saunders saw the mountain man, nodded and said, "Hello, Ab," then went on talking with Clem Young as they leaned against the porch rail.

"No use chasin' the devil around the stump, Clem," said Saunders. "King Lucas as good as sent word that we join up or we'd soon be moving out of Job's Basin. As far as I can figure it, Lucas has told us he'll turn his gun slingers loose on our riders if we hold out of his association."

Ab Martin tamped his pipe and only listened.

"That's the only way he can take over Job's Basin," agreed Clem Young bitterly. "There isn't any open way he can make us join, that I can see. Sheriff Kent's willing to crack down but we'll be having our boys gulched or killed off in one and another town ruckus where the law can't touch King Lucas."

"Holdin' onto all of my cows ain't worth having one of my boys killed," muttered Jim Saunders. "Nearly all the valley riders have been here a long time, some with families, and they ain't gun fighters."

Then Clem Young said, "It's hell what one crooked hombre can do to peaceable folks. But I keep thinkin' King Lucas is too sure of himself, that he's got somethin' more to crack down with than just out-and-out dry gulchin' and maybe some rustlin'."

The two ranchers moved out of earshot then, but in a little while Jim Saunders came back to the porch and sat down beside Ab Martin.

"It's nice that Mary's stayin' with Mrs. Gunderson until after the funeral, Ab," said Saunders. "I reckon we'll have to lend the Gunderson boys a few hands for their haying. Bill's the oldest and he's worryin' over how much his dad was in debt to King Lucas. Tom's only twelve."

"John never had much money to gamble," said Ab Martin quietly. "He couldn't owe much, unless—"

He closed his mouth tightly and looked at Jim Saunders.

"Unless what, Ab?"

"It doesn't matter, Jim." Ab Martin arose and emptied his pipe. "I was just thinkin' but it don't mean more than what you an' Clem Young was sayin'. If the ranchers buck King Lucas there'll be needless killin's."

"You're a funny one, Ab," said Saunders. "I guess we'll have to have another meetin' after the Gunderson funeral and it looks like King Lucas will have his way."

Ab Martin was silent for half a minute, looking up the single street. He didn't mention that he might like to be invited.

"Reckon I'll have a drink for a nightcap," he said then. "I'll be seein' you later, Jim."

The mountain man stepped off the porch. He was a slight figure and a little odd-looking, among the big-hatted ranchers.

Jim Saunders didn't seem to get Ab Martin's meaning and then he cussed some.

"I'll be damned if he didn't walk off alone to get a drink and leave me settin' here! Great hell! He headed into the Trail Saloon for his nightcap. Maybe bein' a trapper makes a man queer."

A POLISHED bar had been added to the Trail Saloon since Ab Martin had last been there. Two dozen or so men were at the game tables. There were some younger ranchers who knew the mountain man and glanced at him curiously.

Eight or ten two-gunned slicks were at the bar, over by the wall and near the card tables. The flat-nosed bartender's eyes seemed to jump as Ab Martin stepped up and ordered whiskey.

With his round mountain hat and his store clothes he had bought when he had been married, Ab Martin appeared even smaller than he was. His mild blue eyes surveyed the room as a couple of the gunhands snickered.

King Lucas was a tall man who prided himself upon his yellow hair and trimmed mustache that matched his nearly yellow eyes. His broadcloth and white shirt were the latest from the East.

King Lucas, however, showed two guns with shiny bone handles, belted under

his black coat. He was talking with three of his own gun-hung gents as Ab Martin ordered his whiskey.

Ab Martin lifted the whiskey glass, sipped at it, then held it in his hand as he walked back toward King Lucas at the end of the bar.

Lucas lifted his chin and scowled, turning his back upon the mountain man. There was a sudden silence throughout the long room of the saloon that had been recently fitted up for gambling, with the newest of tables and a roulette wheel.

The silence grew thicker suddenly. Ab Martin touched King Lucas on one shoulder with his free hand. The mountain man's voice was low but it carried in that hush.

"I'd like to speak to you alone, Lucas."

King Lucas turned, brushing off Ab Martin's hand as if his broadcloth coat had been soiled.

"I don't know you!" sneered Lucas. "Swallow your drink and get out!"

The expression on the mountain man's young-old face didn't change, nor was his voice raised.

"You've made a mistake, Lucas. It's you who's gettin' out. You have one hour, that's all."

A deep-drawn breath whispered over the saloon. Metal could be heard rustling upon leather.

"What?" King Lucas thrust his face forward as he turned and took in this apparently harmless, grayish bearded young man in the round hat. "Whoever you are, you're plumb loco! If you were man-size or big enough to pack hardware I'd have you worked over by—"

There was a gasp and a shifting of feet as Ab Martin interrupted without varying his mild tone.

"I thought you were too yellow to do your own gunpackin', Lucas. In one hour you're to be out of Paint Creek, and by sunup tomorrow I want everyone of your hired back-shooters out of Job's Basin."

"Why, I'll—"

One of King Lucas's hands dropped to a gun butt. Then he stayed his play, seeing no hint of any weapon about Ab Martin.

"Get out!" roared Lucas. "Or you'll be carried out!"

The mountain man lifted his whiskey glass and finished it without moving.

"I'll be back in one hour, Lucas," he repeated. "One hour. You have gambling notes to John Gunderson's Y-B ranch and that's why you had him murdered. I don't own a watch but I can guess at about what's an hour."

FEET shuffled. King Lucas started to lift one big hand. But the mountain man in the round, black hat had turned, set his glass upon the bar and was walking out with his unprotected back toward the roomful of killers.

King Lucas sent his pale eyes darting. His quick gesture held up any action of his hired men. He suspected this was a trap and that guns would flame through doorway and windows if he made the wrong move.

Perhaps he thought the meeting of the ranchers hadn't been quite as his spies had reported. Nothing happened and then it was too late.

Ab Martin's round hat was disappearing through the batwings.

Three of the King Lucas gunhands followed Ab Martin from the Trail Saloon. He noted that two stayed behind him and the third man crossed the street.

The mountain man walked slowly, filling his pipe. He saw that Clem Young had rejoined Jim Saunders on the hotel porch but he didn't have anything to tell them.

More men were coming from the Trail Saloon as the mountain man went into Sid Taylor's general store.

"I'd like to make up a list o' stuff to pick up in the morning, Sid," said Martin.

Sid Taylor was a lean man with a ready grin. He had the rep of often carrying valley folks when cash ran short.

Ab Martin was thinking there couldn't be better neighbors than these valley

people who helped each other. Good place for any man to bring up a family.

Taylor spoke of the Gunderson death with real regret in his voice.

"I feared somethin' knowin' John's weakness for the cards," said Taylor. "But it's hard to believe he'd take that way out, leavin' his family to run the Y-B. It's too much for the kids."

"He didn't take that way, Sid," said the mountain man. "John Gunderson was gulched."

Taylor stared at him. "The way I hear it, that would be hard to prove. But I never heard you say what you didn't know to be true, Ab."

"It's true, Sid. You're correct though. It couldn't be proved."

Sid had put up most of the grocery list. Ab estimated that more than half an hour had passed since he had seen King Lucas.

"I'd like to buy a gun, Sid," announced the mountain man. "One you've taken in that's been used enough to work slick. And a box of shells for it."

Taylor's mouth tightened.

"Sure, Ab. But I didn't know you favored totin' hardware. Maybe some of the ranchers talked fight after their meetin'. That it? Say, Ab! Buyin' a gun has nothin' to do with what you said about Gunderson?"

"Well—" Ab Martin hesitated. "No, Sid. It's just that a short gun sometimes comes handy and my old one's busted."

"Belt and holster, Ab?"

"No, Sid. I'll stick it in my coat pocket."

FIVE minutes later Ab Martin had the butt of a .44 showing in his town coat pocket. Sid Taylor appeared a little edgy but he had learned that the mountain man never told more than he wanted known.

Ab Martin guessed the hour must be about up when he started from the store. He was met by Jim Saunders and Clem Young. There were more men standing in shadows along the street than usual.

Saunders gripped Ab's arm.

"Ab, you locoed fool!" he grated. "Didn't you get out yet?"

"Get out, Jim?" said Ab Martin quietly.

"Yeah!" Clem Young whispered with excitement. "It's all over town! You must be a bit touched, tellin' King Lucas he has to get out of Paint Rock. Nearly all our boys have gone home an' Lucas has enough guns to clean out any as would be crazy enough to side you! You can take my fast saddle horse—"

"Thanks, Clem," interrupted the mountain man. "It's Lucas who has to go. Don't make yourselves targets taggin' with me. Those gunhands might think we're bunchin' up an' that'd start shootin'."

"Well, I'll be—"

Ab Martin turned and walked away, on Jim Saunders' exclamation. As the street shadows moved he knew he had been right. The Lucas killers wouldn't try gulchin' him on the street.

The mountain man hoped old Sheriff Kent wouldn't be drawn into this. He guessed it had been a long time since the grayhaired lawman had been called upon to use his gun.

There were twice as many men as before in the Trail Saloon when Ab Martin pushed open the batwings. He saw the tall King Lucas at the far end of the bar and he could tell that four gun-slicks near him had itching fingers.

Three men had filled glasses of whiskey, halfdown the bar and about twenty feet from Lucas.

Voices died out abruptly, the three drinkers turned hastily away, leaving their filled glasses. A man coughed sudkey, halfway down the bar and about twenty feet from Lucas.

But King Lucas faced the odd, roundhatted mountain man with a cold sneer that widened to a killer grin as he took in the gun protuding from Ab Martin's coat pocket.

Ab walked slowly, looking directly into Lucas's yellow eyes. He had glanced sharply about, hoping to see Raner and Biggs, but they might have been outside.

King Lucas had his thumbs hooked near his gun butts.

The batwings slapped behind the mountain man but he did not take his eyes off King Lucas to see who had entered.

He stopped abruptly. His eyes cocked upon the bartender and the long mirror behind the bar.

"Your hour's up, Lucas," said the mountain man. "You're to get out of Paint Rock—NOW!"

Lucas threw back his big head and laughed.

"You're funny enough, sodbuster, to keep around for a laugh!"

Ab got the play then. In the mirror, back of the bar. The bulky gunhands, Biggs and Raner, were behind him. Biggs had pulled one gun and had lifted it to smash the mountain man from behind.

AB MARTIN'S hand moved as swiftly as a striking snake. He flicked a full glass of whiskey over his shoulder directly into Biggs' eyes.

The gunhand roared with pain and his .45 crashed, the bullet hitting the ceiling.

"You want it then!" bellowed King Lucas, and one of his guns flashed out.

Ab's hand let go of the glass. He seemed to move very slowly as he gripped the .44 in his coat pocket. Lucas's gun exploded on his hasty draw and the lead gouged the bar.

Ab was still bringing his .44 up as if he might be sighting at a still target. Lucas cursed and his gun blazed the second time.

The mountain man's body jerked as the lead went into his side. Lucas triggered the third time but he was falling then. Ab Martin's slow aiming had put a small hole just above Lucas's big nose.

Another gun cracked behind the mountain man and the round hat flew off. The skulking Raner had fired at Ab's back and broken his shoulder.

The mountain man was falling but he placed two more shots with deliberate aim. Raner screamed and fell, his shirt reddening. Biggs, half blinded by the whiskey was hit, just under the chin.

Ab felt the floor swaying. There was more shooting. He tried to lift his gun again but he couldn't.

He saw Jim Saunders and Clem Young. And there was Sid Taylor from the general store, pumping a shotgun. Some half a dozen of the King Lucas killers were jamming toward the batwings.

Old Sheriff Kent stopped the rush with his Peacemaker, and Ab Martin then saw little Bill Gunderson with his dead dad's gun jumping in his hand.

It was quiet as everything went black. . . .

Then, Doc Robbins was talking and Ab Martin was lying on the polished bar.

"He'll be laid up for a while but his kind don't kill easy," said Doc Robbins.

Saunders and Clem Young were arguing over which one would furnish hands to gather Ab Martin's ripened crops. Two other ranchers got into the dispute.

Ab thought there could be nothing finer than having good neighbors.

"But, Ab, why'd you do it alone?" demanded big Jim Saunders. "If you'd wanted it, the boys at the meeting would have been here. Why'd you do it and not say anything?"

"They shouldn't have killed Mary's pet squirrels," said Ab. "Anytime a timber wolf came along an' robbed my traps, I'd get mad and go out and kill him. I got all riled up about those squirrels."

ALL AMERICA IS READING THE SPEED FICTION MAGAZINES

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK VOLP

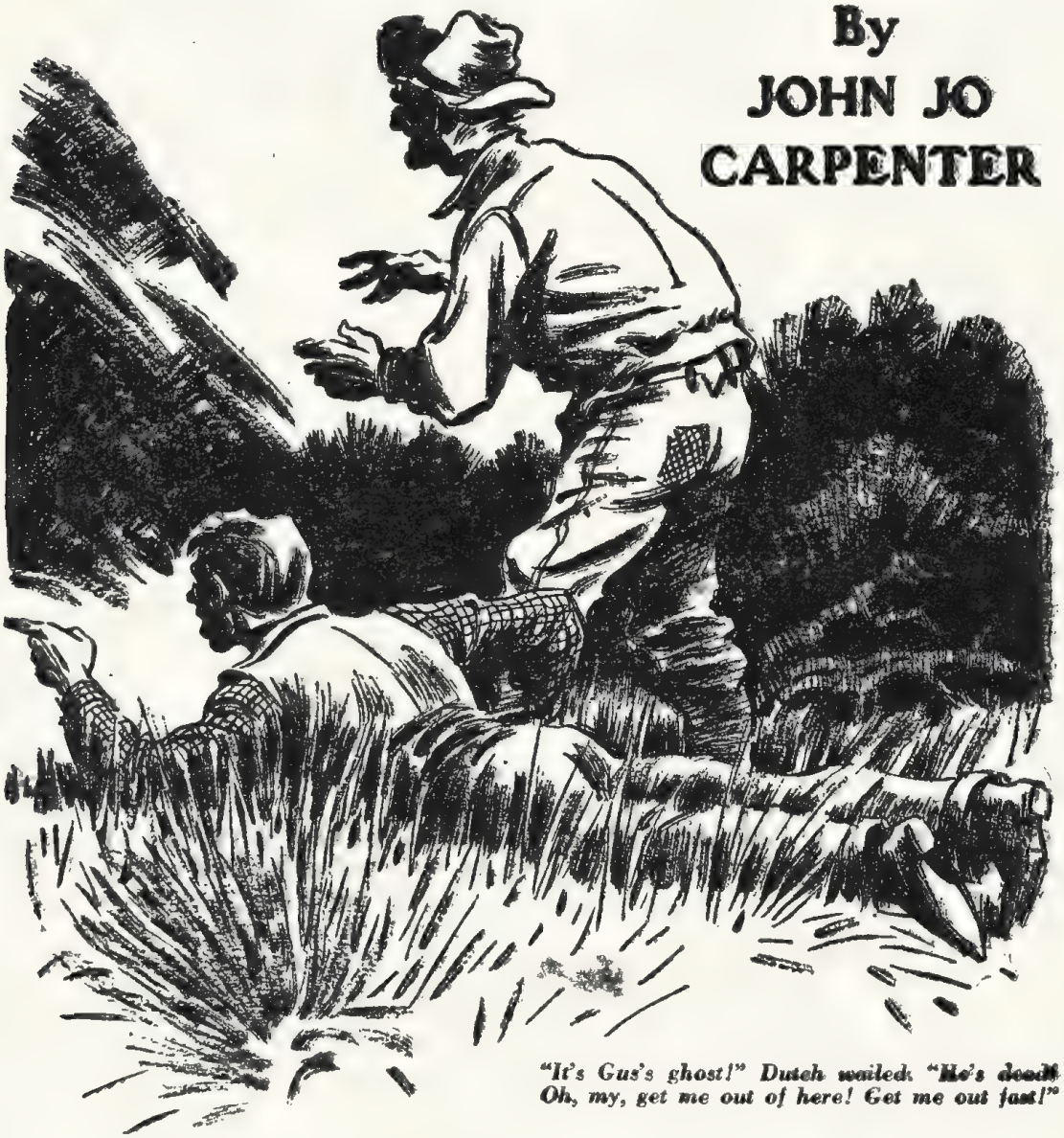
BRAND OF MAGIC

THE KID wouldn't have been so conspicuous if it hadn't been such a hot day. Ordinarily, Coffinrock was a pretty busy place on Saturday, and a shabby rider or two extra went unnoticed. But it was the kind of a day that kept honest folks at home in the shade, as Bland Whitt said, and it took a brass conscience and an ivory skull to brave the blistering sun.

There were three besides Bland in the bar of the alley House, drinking warmish beer, mopping sweat and worrying about grass. Bland had less than any of them to worry about, since most of his range was high up in the hills, where the drought hadn't used all its muscle yet. The others were Charley Drake, pessimistic old Pete Blassingame, and "Dutch" Heller. These three stood to lose every-

The cursing and the fuming and the praying didn't help to bring rain to this peaceful Coffinrock but when one talkative gent encouraged the Indian magic to work in the blood of Gus Furness— how could the outcome be anything but fierce and terrifying . . .?

By JOHN JO CARPENTER



"It's Gus's ghost!" Dutch wailed. "He's dead! Oh, my, get me out of here! Get me out fast!"

thing if the rain didn't come.

"We need us some Injun medicine," vowed old Pete. "The Injuns got rain when they needed it, don't keer what you say. Wish we had some of old Alexander Deertail's rain-magic."

And just then Bland looked out of the window and saw the kid footing it down the street on a sweat-streaked, dust-caked calico mare. The kid's hair was jet-black and extra long, and he had a dark, roundish face with high cheek bones and a strong nose and a firm mouth. What was most astonishing was that he wore no hat. Instead, he had a crimson thing on his head that looked sort of like a turban and sort of like the ceremonial headdress worn by members of the chief's family at an Osage corn-dance.

The beer and the heat together had Bland crouchy with a headache. He was

hard to get along with anyway. Oh, you wouldn't call him a bully, maybe. Call him the kind of man who kindly pointed out other people's faults to them and liked to be appreciated for it.

He gave old Pete a queer look and said, "You've got your wish, old man. Yonder's a two-bit brave. Let's get him to make medicine."

The other three looked out the window. It was Dutch Heller who recognized the kid first.

"Why, it's Gus Furness," he said. "You remember old Ben Furness that married that half-Osage girl up toward Fairweather. That's their oldest boy, August."

Old Pete saw the ugly look in Bland Whitt's face. He didn't care much for the kind of entertainment Bland usually drummed up on a dull day.

"Only a quarter-blood, Bland," Pete said uneasily as Bland started for the door.

"A quarter of a rain would help your grass and keep your damn cattle out of my range," said Bland. He stuck his head out of the door and shouted, "Hey, cowboy!"

The Furness kid was just tying his horse. He looked up and gave Bland a polite nod without smiling.

"Yes?" he said.

"Come on in and have a drink," said Bland.

"Intended to," said Gus.

But when he came into the saloon he did not stop at the bar.

"Where's your wash-bench?" he asked Dally McBryde, the barkeep.

"Back yonder," said old Dally, pointing with his big, hairy hand.

The kid started to unwind the rag around his head, and turned toward the wash-bench, which was just outside the back door, under the tin roof of the back porch. What they saw when the turban-like thing came off, just as he disappeared out of the door, caused all four men to swear.

"Why, he's got a gash in his gourd like he's half scalped!" exclaimed Charley Drake in an awed voice.

THEY set down their glasses and pelted out after the kid, all but old Dally. He leaned his bald head on his big hand and went back to sleep.

Gus Furness was pumping alkali water into the battered enamel basin. He got it full and leaned over it, plunging his head and his whole mop of black hair into the water. They heard him swear as the bitter sulfur water bit into the scabbed wound.

"Ouch!" old Pete Blassingame murmured sympathetically. "Must burn like fire."

"A mite," Gus admitted.

"A right smart of a wound," said Charley Drake.

"Maybe," said Gus.

"Looks like gunshot," said Dutch Heller.

"Could be," said Gus. "Anybody got a clean rag?"

"Care to tell what happened?" said Bland Whitt.

"No," said the kid.

"Well, go to the devil, then!" Bland exclaimed, rubbing his aching head as though to pat down the curiosity raging there.

The kid began soaking the stained rag in the water. Charley Drake said, "Don't use that old rag. I'll get you a clean one."

"I asked for one once," said the kid, "and all I got was a dumb question. I ain't the twice-askin' kind."

Charley came back with a clean white rag, filched from Dally's supply. Gus refused his offer of help and carelessly wound the rag around his head, hiding the two-inch gash in the back of his scalp. Then he finished rinsing out the old rag and hung it on a porch-pole in the sun.

"Dry in a few minutes," he said. "Let's drink."

They followed him back into the bar. He pulled a tobacco sack out of his shirt-front, where it had been hanging around his neck by a shoestring, and dumped out a lone gold piece.

Bland Whitt took one of his fingers and flipped the gold piece back toward the kid.

"Put your money away," he said peevishly. "I'm the rooster with the big spurs here. I'm the bull with the long horns and the wolf with the yellow teeth. I got all the grass and all the luck and all the cows and all the money, and I buy the drinks."

"The hell you say," said the kid.

"Yes, I say!" snarled Bland.

"Mine's whiskey," said the kid.

And Bland, baffled because the kid refused to play flint to his steel merely murmured, "It's too hot for whiskey. Oh,—make mine whiskey too."

THE drink made his headache worse. Charley Drake, a peaceable family man, saw the signs and reckoned he'd better be getting home—the old woman wanted him to haul wash-water from the spring. He left. Dutch Heller had no family but he was just as tender-natured as Charley, and he thought of an excuse, and left right after Drake.

Old Pete Blassingame, whose motto was, "I always expect the worst," was a respectable old grandfather whose son had taken over actual management of the ranch. Pete lived with his son, his daughter-in-law, and their two children. And he saw the signs too—but he stayed.

"We need rain," said Bland.

"Always need rain in this country," said the kid.

"I mean we need it bad."

"Sometimes we need it worse than others but we always need it bad."

"Seems like we always had rain when we needed it, when the Injuns was here," said Bland.

"Now Bland," Pete interrupted in a troubled voice. "Now, Bland."

"It'll rain," said the kid. "It always does."

"We need a *quick* rain," Bland went on in an ugly voice. "We need rain *now!* Ain't you old Ben Furness' son? Ain't you got Injun blood in you?"

"I bled a lot from my head," said the kid. And Pete noticed that his big nose was quivering a little and that the strong mouth had tightened. "Dunno if I got any blood left in me, if it's any of your business."

"We need rain," Bland repeated. "Wiskey, Dally! Wiskey all around."

"Not for me, Bland," said Pete.

"Wiskey all around, damn the luck!"

Dally filled their glasses and they drank.

"You're a quarter Osage," said Bland flatly.

"Do tell," Gus murmured.

Bland moved down the bar a couple of feet until he was practically leaning over the boy. Bland weighed just under two hundred pounds and he stood six feet two in his boots. Gus had the stocky Osage build that made him look clumsy and he was a half a head shorter than Bland, even with the bulky bandage.

"Make us an Injun rain-charm," Bland said. "We need rain."

"Go on," said Gus in a low voice. "I couldn't make it piddle if a puddle would save my life. Lemme alone."

That was where Bland made his mistake. He mistook the kid's tact for timidity. Pete could tell, all right—but Pete was just looking on. He had seen men be reasonable with drunks before, and take things they wouldn't take from a sober man. He wished there was some way to warn the kid that, drunk or sober, Bland Whitt couldn't be allowed an inch, lest he take a mile.

"Do us a rain-dance," said Bland. "You're a quarter-breed and I'll settle for a quarter of a rain. We don't necessarily need no gully-washer, no sod-soaker, no cloudburst. Do us a rain-dance and get us a little old mizzlin' piddler to lay the dust."

"Whiskey," said Gus, "never took the place of water in a drouth. You've had too much of one and not enough of the other, Big Mouth. If you want a rain, why don't you pray for it?"

His fist came up—hard—and caught Bland Whitt on the big jaw.

"Oh, my heavens!" Dally McBride moaned, coming awake. He ducked under the bar and came up with his persuader —three feet of pitchfork handle, with an ounce and a half of shot in the business end. "Stay off the furniture!" he

yelled. "Break a stick and I'll break your backs."

Bland took the punch, rocking on his heels. His legs buckled but he caught himself on the bar and shook his head until it cleared. Pete Blassingame, not liking the look on the big man's face, caught him by the elbow with both hands. Bland shook him off easily.

"No ragged 'breed rider can do that to me," he said thickly.

He swung. Gus Furness ducked under the blow and drove his fist at Bland's stomach. Down came Bland's other elbow. It cracked on the kid's head and he pitched forward on his face without ever connecting with Bland's wind. Bland stepped backward breathing hard. Gus lay still.

"You ortn't to done that, hit him on his wound," said Pete.

Bland whirled, fists clenched. Pete took a step backward—he couldn't help himself. Bland looked down red-faced at the prone kid. Then he jerked his hat lower on his head and stormed out of the saloon without another word.

DALLY McBride laid down his persuader and came around to help Pete carry the kid back to the porch. Dally attended the wound, which had broken open again, and Pete pumped and soaked the rags for him.

"Bland had better watch out now," Pete said. "He's not just got an Injun after him—he's got old Ben Furness's kid, too. You recall what an old hellion Ben was; and you mix that with Osage—! Bland's a bully but he shouldn't have done it."

"It's the heat," said Dally. "Damn! We do need rain."

That evening, Gus seemed better.

"No, thanks," he said, "but I'll be riding along."

"You can't ride with a head like that," Pete protested. "You've got a hard head, boy, but not that hard."

He had taken Gus home with him and urged him to stay on the Box-4 until he had recovered; but the grim-faced youth, looking more Indian than ever in his anger, was determined to be gone. Old Pete's son had ridden up to Grit, where there was a Federal land office, to see about leasing some government range, if there was any. He had taken his family along.

"We can batch here fine, boy," Pete insisted.

"Thanks-a-same, but I got me an errand to run," said Gus.

Pete noticed that Gus had taken an old .45 out of his saddle-bag and laced it around his trunk. Further, when the kid rode off on the old calico mare, he headed for Whitt's Pass," the long upper canyon trail to Bland Whitt's place. Old Pete shook his head as he went back to the house.

"Course, the Pass leads to lots of other places," he tried to comfort himself, "but in keepin' with my practice of always expectin' the worst, and based on what tuk place this pee-em, I have to conclude Gus's up to no good. Dang Bland Whitt anyhow; and dang old Ben Furness for not keepin' the boy to home—wherever that is."

He stood it until about moon-up, which was shortly after ten o'clock, and then got out his horse and rode to Dutch Heller's place. He was an old man and he was played out by the time he got there. Dutch told him to rest, while he one of his own riders over to Charley Drake's.

Thus it was that at midnight, or shortly thereafter, some twelve heavily armed men rode out of Heller's place and headed purposefully toward the Pass. They were men who adhered to a certain code of honor, one clause of which prohibited picking on a wounded man. Also they were men persecuted by drouth, and naturally resentful of a big, loud-mouthed, lucky man whose cattle all ran in the fatter pastures up in the hills.

"Somebody ought to tell old Ben Furness," said Charley Drake. "I know if a kid of mine was runnin' around with a gourd like that, I'd want to know about it."

But no one knew where old Ben lived now. He had moved from Coffinrock when his tribe of kids were young 'uns to

Wolf Springs; and from there to some place on Lauderbeck Ridge; and then, according to some, clear out of the Territory.

"I'll stand in Ben's stead," said old Pete Blassingame firmly. "I raised a boy myself."

"I've got a couple of sprouts," said another rancher, "and if it rains, I hope to bring 'em up to size. But Lordy, if we don't get moisture pretty soon—"

THE trail rose steeply, as they entered the Pass. If there was a beauty-spot in the country, this was it—a long, steep-sided valley with pine-crusted edges, deer-haunted sides. Ordinarily, men loved to ride here, merely to hunt it they had no better business.

But tonight their horses' hoofs kicked up a cloud of dust that hung in the unnaturally hot night air long after they had passed by. And the pine-needles hung dead and lifeless, covered with dust and parched for moisture, sickly and sallow under the moon. Here and there a steer or a cow showed head from the brush, and they read their own brands, shaking their heads grimly. These cattle had wandered far, as a critter will when its range is drying up. In a little while they'd run into Bland Whitt's cattle, for this was his range, and not all of his lordly herds would be up in the peaks,

"No ragged 'breed rider can do that to me," he said, as he hit at Gus.

around the mountain springs.

"Bland's fences are down somewhere," said Dutch Heller bleakly, "and if we get him r'iled up he's goin' to blame us. And we're to blame too, for not keepin' our hungry stock to home."

Nobody said anything for a while; and then Pete offered:

"He had no business funnin' the boy about his Injun blood. If he wants trouble, I'll take him on."

They hit a running stream, which have been bigger this time of year, but which still made them think wistfully of their own dusty watercourses. And here they began to ride quietly and more watchfully, because Brand Whitt's stand of buildings was up ahead, only a short way, and they might run into his riders anywhere.

Still they had seen no sign of Gus Furness, a thing which worried them immensely, Pete most of all. Each time they reached one of the side-canyons, where trails branched off in other directions, old Pete got down from his horse and searched for sign. He squinted his old eyes uselessly and burnt many matches to no purpose.

"If he didn't want to be followed, he'd leave no trail," he said mournfully. "There's that much Injun in him, anyway. Gawd! I only hope the blood didn't get the best of him, so's he'd knife Bland in his sleep."

"Pshaw!" said Charley. "How'd he get by that house of Whitt's riders and that pack o' dog's?"

"He could," said Pete darkly. "An Injun could, and when Gus left this peeem, he was all Injun to look at. You'd never suspect Furness blood in him. Not that old Ben Furness was much of a bargain, at that. Hell's bells and Holy catfish, but it's hot! I wish it'd rain!"

SUDDENLY they heard a sound high up on the mountainside to their right, and instinctively they reigned in and sat listening tensely.

It was a hound, an organ-voiced hound, trailing hot and running hard, not more than a half-mile away.

"Runnin' coon!" said Dutch with a sigh of relief. "One of Bland's dogs loose."

"Coon won't run this time of year," said Pete. "And that dog's close to whatever he's runnin' because his head is held up high and he's follerin' a hot scent offen the leaves and bushes. How can I tell? Because his voice don't echo from the ground, like it would if he had his nose down low on a cold trail."

"Deer, then," said someone. "Or a lion."

"Or a man," said Pete, "or a strange hoss. That's old Razor, if I know the voice. And Razor wouldn't chase a lion for love nor money, since he got clawed that time."

"But he would chase a strange rider," said Charley Drake in a troubled voice. "And he hates an Injun"

"Let's go!" said Pete. "Head for the spring. If it's a rider, he's on that upper trail where them two dead trees are and he's bound to come out near the spring."

They turned their horses up the slope and pushed them hard, listening every now and then. Once their blood froze as they listened for long moments in vain. They kept their thoughts to themselves but they pictured the long-legged hound catching up with the tired old calico mare, hamstringing her with those wicked fangs of hers and—.

Then suddenly they heard the dog again but this time he was no longer belling regularly and lustily. His voice had an angry, puzzled whimper in it that sounded more like yelping than baying. Pete Blassingame chuckled grimly.

"Now I know it's Gus," he said. "And the Injun in him kotched onto the fact he was bein' trailed and he's crossed the dog up, boxed his own trail, some way."

"He's pretty good if he can box his traeks in this dry weather," grumbled one.

"He's an Injun," Pete reminded them.

They reached the spring in another ten minutes riding, and there dismounted to rest their horses. They could hear the dog still worrying over the trail, somewhere above them, but whether he had

reached the spring and passed on, whether the fugitive rider had by-passed the spring altogether, or whether they had come this far, they could not tell. Pete struck more matches, and as the last one burned his thumb, he swore with excitement.

"Gus's been here! Drank and carried water to his horse in his hat. There's no tracks but he wouldn't leave any. But here's where the water dripped and here's where the horse stood."

"He didn't have no hat," Dutch reminded him.

"His saddlebag, then. Or something. He'd find some sly way to water his critter. Remember, he's a quarter Osage."

They mounted again and here Charley Drake took charge. Three of the men he sent down to the lower, main trail again. Two more he sent upward to follow the dog's voice and see what they could see. One, he sent on a bee-line toward Bland's place.

"The rest of us will head for the little hay-medder," he said, "for that's where I suspect Gus is. There used to be an old Injun camp there when he was a little tyke. I didn't think he'd remember that far back, when this was still Reservation. Let's go!"

OLD Pete Blassingame moaned as he shoved his horse ahead. It would be another hard ride to the hayfield and it would take everything he had to keep him in the saddle. He was glad Charley had relieved him of the responsibility of thinking and deciding.

The hay-meadow, one of Bland Whitt's most treasured possessions, was a little, level mountain park about thirty acres in area. It was irregularly shaped, with a narrow, rocky box canyon at the upper end, and it was entirely surrounded by fantastic rock formations and huge piles of glacial boulders.

The moon was already well down when they reached it. Long before this, they had ceased to hear the hound—a circumstance which worried them because they could not explain it. The two men who had been sent to follow the dog were to have signalled them with three shots, spaced *bang-bang*, and *bang*, when they caught up with the animal. There had been no signal. It was as though the dog, the two men, and whoever the dog was chasing, had been swallowed up by the hot night.

Yet even as they swung out into the open meadow, their minds were abruptly taken off such minor worries as what had happened back there where the dog had been.

A waspish whine sounded through their ranks, and three men who were nearly hit, but not quite, yelled their dismay and tumbled from their horses, seeking cover behind rocks. Then came the crack of a gun somewhere ahead and to the right, and Charley Drake bellowed a command for all of them to take cover.

Pete thought he was tired but his aged, aching limbs got him down on the ground and behind some rocks twenty yards away, before he knew he was scared. There he lay, panting and quivering, amused to see how pleasant a little excitement could be for a change.

"Don't anybody shoot!" came Charley's warning voice. "It's probably Gus Furness and he's got no way of knowin' it's friends. Lay low—I'll give him a whoop."

"It won't do no good, Charley," Pete called him grinning to himself. "That was a rifle, a big one, and Gus didn't have no rifle. That's Bland Whitt's big .45-70, or I'm a monkey's uncle."

He heard Charley's exclamation of dismay.

"We'd best smoke him out quick, before he gets set," Pete went on. "S'pose you stay under kiver here and I'll take a coupla boys and drift down to the trees again, and head up and try to come 'round him from the other side."

"All right," said Charley. "Watch yourself."

"Watch myself, hell!" Pete muttered as the began his snake-like descent on his belly. "That wouldn't be no fun. Lordie, but I wish it would rain!"

He cursed Bland Whitt more than once before he reached the cover of the

trees. Twice he heard gunshots behind him, one from his friends, one from the rifle, which he judged was being fired from a comfortable perch somewhere up in the upper box canyon. The rifleman had the range on them; he could afford to sit and grin and laugh at their short-reaching hand guns.

Reaching the trees, Pete trotted, panting, in a tight circle around the meadow, not bothering much about cover. Dutch Heller had followed him, and Dutch was worried about their carelessness. But, as Pete pointed out, the rifleman couldn't see them if he stayed where he could cover the hay-meadow.

"What's over the ridge, beyond the meadow?" Dutch asked.

"That's the dry side," said Pete. "Injuns used to hold their secret religious services there. It's sacred ground for some reason and they never let white men see them cut up there. There's nothin' but rocks and alkali and scrub—and damn little scrub! Now, watch where you're goin'. We should tree this critter about—whope!"

He flung himself down, as a clatter of many hoofs came from above them. A rider was coming along the hogback ridge, a rider on a shod horse, to judge by the ring of steel against granite.

"That'll be Bland!" Pete hissed. "Get the drop on him quick!"

THEY saw the big, truculent rancher appear suddenly on the horizon not twenty yards away, just as a veritable fusillade of shots crackled across the hay-meadow below them. Bland swore and wheeled his horse and charged back the way he had come.

And then, just as he disappeared from sight, he appeared again, riding like mad, and heedless of the flying bullets. There was something awe-inspiring in that flight, because not just the man, but the horse, was running like a haunted thing. It was a noble animal, a huge black gelding, and he flung himself down the canyon into the hay-meadow with magnificent carelessness. Pete would have bet it would take a horse twenty minutes to make the descent, yet they heard the black streaking across the sod in less than five, going like the wind.

Then Pete heard Dutch, beside him, give an odd cry, and he looked down to see the little Dutchman cowering and panting on the ground, pointing with one finger toward the trail down which Bland Whitt had thundered. Pete looked up.

A figure was coming down the trail on foot, a silent, ghostly figure that had the vague shape of a man but which was unearthly as no man was that Pete had ever seen. He shone, and yet he seemed to be transparent. His gleaming body was stocky and chunky but he ran with light-footed and inhuman speed. A pile of bandages on his head was surmounted by a nodding, white-tipped feather.

"It's G-G-G-Gus's ghost!" Dutch wailed. "He's d-d-d-dead! Oh, my, get me out of here."

"Ghost my foot!" Pete yelled, scrambling to his feet. "He's gone Injun is all! He's on the warpath. No wonder he scared Bland to death! Gus, you damn fool, come back here!"

The youth turned his startled face at the cry and his hand went down to his side. But it came up with a knife instead of a gun—a long, gleaming, vicious looking blade made from an old horse-hoof-rasp. Gus crouched a moment, fondling the knife. Then he turned and darted away— and vanished before Pete's eyes.

Pete blinked.

"Damn the kid, he's gone back to type. Gus! Gus!"

There was no answer. The firing below him had ceased suddenly. Dutch came up behind him, still trembling a little and still keeping his hand next to his gun.

Then there came the sound of the dog again, a loud, frantic baying close behind them. Pete knew what had happened. The dog had been baying Gus's trail until the kid took time to fool him. Now the dog had unravelled it again. Pete smiled grimly. Gus would have no time for boxing his trail now. He might get away from an old man with a pair of rheumy old eyes but he'd not escape Razor's keen nose.

The dog came lolloping down toward them, running hard, with his head held high. Pete shouted at him and tried to grab hold of the trailing bit of chain, but the dog was intoxicated with the nearness of his quarry and he paid no attention. He was a huge beast, a quarter mastiff and the rest staghound, and he ripped the chain out of Pete's hands without breaking stride.

They saw the dog scramble down the canyon at the point where Gus had vanished, his yelps getting sharper, shriller, more excited with every leap.

"Razor! Razor! To heel—heel, damn you for a no-count dog, to heel!" Pete yelled.

Somebody shot and Pete saw a spark where the slug ricocheted near the dog. Then the animal was out of sight, lost in the darkness. Another shot sounded, and then another and another. But these slugs were not aimed at the dog.

"They're shooting at US!" Pete yelled.

Dutch was already down, for a second, Pete thought he had been hit. But then Dutch began firing and yelling excitedly.

"Over there—the fellow with the rifle! Only he's in six-gun range and he's usin' his colt. You're a good shot, Pete. Get him!"

"Where?" Pete wailed. "I cain't see a thing!"

DUTCH crawled up beside him and pointed. As Pete strained his eyes, he heard a rattle of shots below them, in the meadow, coming closer and closer. He heard a horse scream and a man's yell of anguish. And then the dog began howling—a nerve—wracking howl of mortal terror or pain, he could not tell which. It went on and on and on.

"Where! where! where!" Pete moaned, over and over.

The hidden marksman betrayed himself with another shot. It burned dangerously close but the flash of the gun showed Pete where to shoot. He dropped a slug near the flash, where he would judge the man's body to be, and got a rippling stream of profanity for his trouble. He judged he had come close without hitting.

"To hell with him! That'll chase him back a mite," he whispered. "Let's head for the medder. That's Charley and our boys and they've got Bland cornered."

It had grown dark suddenly—Pete had not realized it was so near to moon setting. They jumped up and stumbled down the side of the canyon, swearing because the dog's yelping drowned out all other sounds. They could not tell if they were being pursued or not.

In a few moments they reached the level of the hay-meadow and Pete sank down to the ground, completely spent. The dog chose that moment to stop howling and a silence as thick as the dark night itself closed around them.

"Pete! Pete! Where are you?" came a low voice through the darkness. "Are you all right? Speak up—we got Bland with a slug through his side and he'll behave. Where are you?"

"Right here," Pete answered. "Right here, Charley, but there's still one of Bland's men behind us with that rifle."

"One of my men, you damned old fool?" came Bland's angry voice. "I haven't got any men out! And wait till I get my hands on you for abusing my dog."

Pete let Dutch help him to his feet, and they picked their way across the stretch of flat grassland to where Charley and his men and horses stood, a dark, restless clump. Bland lay on the ground and one of his captors was mending the flesh-wound in his side. His handsome, brutally arrogant face was drained of blood.

"Wasn't me tortured your dog, Bland," said Pete. "It must have been the kid. And it serves you right, only I wish it was you instead of the dog. That lick you gave him on his sore head sent him off his nut. He's on the warpath."

Bland shuddered.

"I know. He scared me to death for a minute. I—I thought he was going to scalp me and I didn't have my gun out. It was in my saddle-bag—I wasn't man-huntin'—I was just tryin' to catch a strayed dog."

"You chasin' the dog, the dog chasin' Gus, and Gus chasin' you," said Pete. "And you didn't have no men out? Then who is that up there with your rifle?"

"*My* rifle?" Bland snarled. "Hell, my rifle's busted a month ago and into Tucson to be fixed!"

"Then who—?"

"Why," said Bland, "the kid, the Injun."

"No," said Pete thoughtfully, "because he tuck a shot at us whilst Gus was 'way back on the trail yonder, and because when we saw Gus he didn't have no rifle and sure as sin no place on his nekkid body to hide one. There's somebody else up there—and I think I know who."

HE walked a little way from the group and cupped his hands over his mouth.

"Ben!" he shouted. "Ben Furness! Ben, you disgraceful old catamount, come down and quit shootin' at people!"

In a moment came a suspicious answer:

"Who's that yellin'? Why should I come down?"

"It's Pete Blassingame and I give you my word you're not goin' to be harmed."

"All right, I'll come down," came the answer, "but I'll have my rifle cocked, so don't try nothin'."

As they waited for Ben, Pete said, "I knowed it had to be him. He's got one of them old Springfield .45-90's, a bigger gun than yours, Bland, and the only other big rifle in the country. If it wasn't you, it had to be him. But what in tarnation's he doin' back here?"

Old Ben strode into view, a tough, gnarled little man with a scrub of white whiskers on a belligerent face. The gun was almost as big as he was.

"Howdy, Pete," he said without offering to shake hands. "What's all the posse out for? That kid of mine been up to shenanigans?"

"None he needs to be ashamed of," said Pete gently.

He went on to explain what had happened, starting with the brawl in the bar that morning.

"So you see, this skunk here fetched it all on himself," he wound up. "He shouldn't have hit the kid on the head, with him already barked. Drove him off his nut."

"Off his nut!" old Ben rasped. "That kid's a quarter Osage and he's got a skull like granite! He was already off his nut. Been frettin' about the dry weather that's kilt off most of our barley and dried up our range, and he come to me with the fool proposition that he ort to come up here to the ceremonial ground and make a rain dance and bring the rain! I—well, I didn't want any of his damn Osage nonsense, and one thing led to another, and he lit out on my best calico mare, and I barked him on the coconut with my .45-90 as he rid off. Rain-dance my hind end! Superstitious young pup, after I sent him off to school and all—"

"You mean," said Pete a little thickly, "that he *wanted* to do a rain-dance to fetch rain? You mean—that's why he come up here in the first place? No wonder he was so tetchy about it!"

Suddenly a sound came to them—a sound very like the howling of the dog, but there was a tone in it that could have come from no dog's throat. It was an eerie, haunting sound and it came from over the ridge, on the other side of the "dry slope," the ancient sacred ground. Pete felt his hair rising on end.

"Gus!" he whispered. "Doin' a rain-dance all by himself!"

The dog crept into their circle then, with his own hackles standing on end. He bellied his way to where Bland Whitt lay on the ground, and buried his terrified head in his master's armpit.

And where once his tail had wagged, now a bloody stump showed. Pete shivered, remembering that keen hoof-rasp knife of Gus's. No wonder the dog had yowled so piteously!

"God!" Bland quavered. "I—I'll never raise hand to a man again, I swear it! That's the most horrible sound I ever—"

"Little pup!" old Ben Furness grated. "Him and his Osage monkeyshines. I'll larrup him within an inch of his life!"

HE stomped away. Pete stood a moment and then bolted after him, catching him in a few steps. He held the old man's elbow and made him ground the gun.

"Leggo!" Ben snarled. "He's my kid and I won't have him makin' a jakass out of himself thisaway! Damned little savage!"

"No," said Pete. "Let him be. Put out your hand, Ben, and feel. Rain!"

The big drops were few in number, but as silence fell they could hear the whisper of a sheet of rain on the other side of the slope, blowing toward them. Pete looked up and he knew why it had darkened so suddenly. It was not moonfall, but black clouds which had blown across the moon.

"Rain!" he breathed thankfully. "Rain!"

It hit them hard, then—a bellying, blowing, soaking downpour that chilled them to the bone. But instead of cowering or running from it, they threw off their hats and yelled like crazy men. Grass would green up again, cattle come home and grow fat, and neighbors would stop quarreling and shooting at each other.

They lifted Bland Whitt tenderly to his horse and started back toward his place.

"There'll be coffee ready, I promise," Bland told them, "and if there ain't, I personally will skin that cook alive. No, I won't either—I vowed I'd never lay hand on another man again and I mean it!"

"All right," said old Ben, "but first, I got me a little chore to do."

He spurred his horse up to the top of the ridge, and they heard him holler:

"Gus! August Furness, you damned Osage whelp, cut out that monkeyshines and come here! No more dancin'—do you want to drown us all?"

And they heard the boy's answer, sane enough:

"All right, Pop. But she sure is a sod-soaker, ain't she?"

Pete said, "Let's get that coffee, boys. I'm too old to risk my bones in this much longer. But there's nothing more wonderful in the world than a good rain, is there?"

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

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Mingaloe Hide-out

ILLUSTRATED BY
H. L. V. PARKHURST

SO LONG AS Jim Mingaloe kept his job at the Stabley ranch, he was regarded as an ordinary cowpuncher, and folks overlooked his being, as they said, the last of the Mingaloe wild bunch. But when he up and quit without good reason, eyebrows were raised and tongues began to wag all over the Trinity range. It was as though young Jim had broken parole.

But he meant no wrong. He'd become restless and dissatisfied. He'd decided, after a dozen years as a cowpoke, that a man could get nowhere on forty a month and found. But it was what he'd heard from a drifter that made up his mind.

The way the drifter told it, the British were mixed up in a shooting war with some African pioneers called the Boers and needed horses from America. The British Army wanted eight-hundred-pound, five-year-old ponies and was paying twenty to forty dollars a head. According to the drifter, a wild-horse hunter could make himself a poke—easy. So Jim, remembering the wild mustangs in

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Jim Mingaloe knew the Barrens better than any man but he wanted to ride there alone—not with someone whose destruction would make the townsmen hate Jim more than they did at present. But it wasn't for Jim to decide the outcome when a gun pointed his way

He knew he couldn't face all those guns and stay alive but it was Jodie he was thinking of, when he started shooting.

the Barrens, the old Mingaloe outlaw country, figured it was an easy way to make some big money.

He told Old Man Stabley he was quitting and the bull-necked rancher blew up and bellowed, "Quit and be damned! I'll see that you won't get another job on this range!"

He gave Jim his time but refused him a horse—even though Jim had been with him since he was a lanky kid of fourteen. Jim hoofed it to the cowtown of Trinity, where he hoped to get a stake, lugging his saddle and warbag and bedroll. And at Trinity he found that Old Man Stab-

ley had carried out his threat.

Leathery-faced old Sheriff Dan McCall told Jim in kindly fashion, "Stabley's passed word and got you blackballed. You'll have a time landing another job."

"Don't want a job," Jim said. He told the lawman about his plan to go wild-horse hunting in the *malpais*. "All I need is a stake."

"Nobody'll stake you, not in this town."

"Why not? Because my name's Mingaloe?"

"That's about it, son."

Jim's face turned rocky. "Why would they hold that against me?" he muttered. "Everybody knows I never rode with the wild bunch. I was only a kid in those days."

"Folks always believe the worst, Jim," Sheriff McCall said. "Take my advice and go back to Old Man Stabley. He'll give you back your job if you apologize."

"Not on your life!" Jim growled. "Not after the way he talked. No; I'm getting a stake—somehow!"

It was like butting a stone wall, head on. Banker Mark Jarvis said no, politely but firmly. Trinity's biggest storekeeper, John Wyland, wouldn't even listen. Tex Hammond, the liveryman, said he wasn't able to do any staking. Herb Shannon, the livestock dealer, would have staked anybody else, for he knew about the British buying up western horses, but he said, "Old Man Stabley holds a short-term note of mine and I've got to ask him to renew it when it comes due next week. If I crossed him up by staking you, he'd be apt to make it tough for me. Sorry, Jim."

A couple other townsmen were also sorry. Jim ended up on the steps of the Cattlemen's Bar, his gear stacked on the porch behind him. He felt battered and bruised in his mind, and his spirits had dropped down a bottomless well. He began to hate Trinity for the deal it was giving him. He knew too well that if he couldn't get a stake in this town, he wouldn't get one anywhere. Outside of the Barrens, which now was empty wasteland, this was the only town and range he knew. He might get a riding job somewhere else, some place where he wasn't known, but Jim didn't want another job at cowpoke wages. He wanted better pay and to be his own boss. He guessed that he was a lot like the Mingaloes, after all.

HE'D been parked there on the saloon steps for more than an hour when he noticed a girl wearing levis come from the bank and mount a pinto pony. His eyes sparked with interest for the girl was Jodie Moore—the prettiest filly, cowpokes claimed, within a hundred miles of Trinity. She was the spoiled daughter of Patrick Moore, an easy-going Irishman who owned a ranch second in size only to Old Man Stabley's big spread.

The girl had inherited a wealth of auburn hair from her redheaded sire, and flawless beauty from her Spanish-New Mexican mother. Sedate folks considered Jodie a little wild because she wore pants and rode where she pleased, with whom she pleased, and had so many cowpokes come duded up to court her. But she had built up a false front of prideful haughtiness and taken to snubbing people who disapproved of her free and easy ways—and that, Jim Mingaloe guessed, was her only real fault.

She came jogging along on her pinto pony, and Jim's interested gaze must have drawn her attention. She looked squarely at him, half smiled, then abruptly swung over to him. She reined in, leaned forward, crossed her arms on the pommel. She wore a gray flannel shirt and a broad-brimmed hat. Not even mannish clothes dimmed her prettiness.

She had a man's way of talking at times, and said, "I hear you've quit your job and are trying to find a stake to go wild-horse hunting."

Jim had risen, removed his hat. He was surprised, for Jodie Moore had never before done more than greet him casually.

"I didn't find a stake," he told her.

"Just what do you need?"

"A string of horses, some camp gear, supplies for maybe two months," Jim said. "I'll have to hire a couple of riders who can handle mustangs but I could

pay them after I sell the horses I round up."

The girl gazed at him in silence for a long moment, measuring and weighing him. Her eyes glowed with some thought. Finally she said, "You've got a stake, friend. I'll send you four good horses from our Shamrock Ranch—with two of our *vaqueros*. We can spare the horses and we're top-heavy with riders right now. I'll stop by Wyland's store and tell him he's to give you what you need in gear and supplies."

Jim frowned, shook his head. "You can't stake me," he said. "I'm grateful, sure. But I can't take it from you. Folks would talk."

"Folks already talk about you, Mingaloe."

"I'm thinking about you."

She smiled thinly. "They talk about me, too. Do you want a stake or don't you?"

"Sure, but—"

"Well, you've got a stake," said Jodie Moore.

She swung the pinto about and was riding to Wyland's store before Jim could protest further.

JIM had his last month's wages, forty dollars, so he ate at the Square Deal Cafe and spent the night in a room at the Trinity Hotel—and in the morning a vaquero, who said he was Luis Seguin, looked him up. Luis was from the Moore ranch and he'd ridden in with four spare horses marked with Pat Moore's Shamrock—or, as some folks called it, Cloverleaf. Jim Mingaloe had wakened with the idea that he had merely dreamed that encounter with Jodie Moore. Seguin's arrival convinced him that it had really happened.

"Another rider," Luis said, flashing a grin. "He'll be long, Jim."

Jim nodded. He couldn't complain because only one rider had showed up. He had alrady obtained more from Jodie Moore, whatever her reason, than he had a right to expect. He told Luis they would use two of the horses for pack animals on the trip to the Barrens. He threw his saddle onto a big roan that caught his eye.

They went, then, to Wyland's store. Jim bought beans and bacon, coffee and flour. He ordered two axes, a Winchester rifle and cartridges, a supply of matches, a coil of rope for lariats, a coffee pot, a frying pan, a bigger cook pan, tincups and plates and cutlery—some odds and ends.

John Wyland supplied him willingly, but said, "And this is to be charged to Pat Moore's account?" He was eaten up by curiosity.

Jim merely said, "Whatever Jodie Moore told you, storekeeper."

Luis had gotten pack saddles and tarpaulins from the saddlery, and the two of them made up the packs. They put the three animals to be led on halter ropes, and so were ready to start out. They mounted and Luis said he'd handle the string.

They headed out Main Street but Jim pulled up when Sheriff McCall motioned to him from the courthouse steps. The sheriff stood there with Lawyer Mark Owens and the sight of the attorney made Jim's face stiffen.

Twelve years ago, when the Mingaloe crowd had been wiped out by a law posse, Mark Owens had been county prosecutor. He'd been a man of about thirty, then, ambitious and over-zealous, and he, more than Sheriff McCall, had brought about the wild bunch's downfall. Owens had made a deal with one of the band, Sam Loughran, a dirty dealer, and Loughran had led the outlaw band into a gun trap. Big Bart Mingaloe and his two wild sons, Hank and Luke, had been killed. Two others had been taken prisoner and later hanged.

Owens had partly broken his word to the traitor, Sam Loughran. He'd kept Loughran from being hanged but, instead of letting him off scot-free as he'd promised, Owens had had him sent to prison. All that had happened after the wild bunch took time out from rustling and horse stealing to raid the Trinity bank and make off with twenty thousand

dollars—loot that never had been recovered.

Mark Owens had tried to send Jim along to prison with Loughran and would have succeeded had not Sheriff McCall testified in court that Jim had never ridden the outlaw trail—that he was a Mingaloe by adoption only, that Big Bart Mingaloe had found him, a four-year-old kid, after Apaches had raided a wagon train and killed all its people except the frightened boy.

As McCall had testified, Big Bart Mingaloe had raised young Jim in the wild Barrens but had never started him out as an outlaw.

Jim thought of all that in the time it took him to swing over to where McCall and Mark Owens, now a fat and prosperous attorney with a private practice, stood on the courthouse steps.

McCall said, "I see you've got a stake, Jim, and I wish you luck. But there's one thing I want you to tell me—truthfully. Sam Loughran has just been released from prison and I've a telegram from Sheriff Nolan, down at Belden, warning me that Loughran is heading this way. I want to know if it's because of Loughran that you've quit your job."

Jim frowned and said, "Sheriff, I didn't know it was time for Loughran to be turned loose. I swear it."

Fat Mark Owens broke in, "He's probably lying, Sheriff. He's heading for the Barrens and that's where Loughran will go. I'd gamble that they're up to something." He stared at Jim. "How come Jodie Moore staked you to an outfit?"

Jim wanted no trouble but he had trouble holding back anger. He said flatly, "Damn you, Lawyer! You asked me all the questions I have to answer, twelve years ago. What I do now is none of your business!"

He swung his horse away, and behind him Mark Owens cursed and Sheriff Dan McCall chuckled.

JIM and Luis didn't make a halt until they reached Largo Creek, thirty miles north of Trinity and on the rocky fringe of the Barrens. It was sundown, then, and they made night camp. They watered and grained the horses, then put them on picket line. Jim gathered brush and built the fire and the *vaquero* did the cooking. The second Shamrock rider hadn't showed up but just as Jim finished eating he heard a drumming of hoofs. He said, "Your partner's coming, Luis," then saw that he was wrong.

It was Jodie Moore who rode into the camp. She was mounted on her pinto, wore her mannish riding clothes, had a bedroll tied to her saddle. She said, "Howdy, boys. You traveled faster than I expected." She dismounted. "But I'm in time for chuck, it seems."

Jim was staring blankly. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

The girl gazed at him with a pretense of surprise. "Didn't you expect me?" she said. "I told you that I was going into the Barrens with you. That was part of the bargain. You agreed to it."

She smiled, went to the fire and accepted a tin plate piled high with grub from Luis. Like a cowpuncher, she hunkered down and pitched in. Luis was grinning and Jim gaped with amazement, with bewilderment. Jim remembered no such bargain as Jodie had mentioned; he hadn't agreed to take her anywhere. He didn't like this. He went to the fire and told her so.

"You're riding back, soon as you've eaten," he said. "If you won't go alone, I'll turn the outfit back—and call it quits. It's crazy, you going into the Barrens with a couple of men. What'll people think? And your father—"

"I don't care what anyone thinks," Jodie said. "As for Pat Moore—well, you just don't know him. He won't worry."

"He'll come after you. He'll try to use a gun on me."

"Don't be difficult, Mingaloe," the girl said. "I'm here and I'm going farther. I've got a reason for going into the Barrens—and I need you to guide me. You know that *malpais*." She went on eating, then paused again. "Luis, there's only one thing a Mingaloe savvies. Talk his language."

Luis grinned and drew his sixgun,

throwing down on Jim, and said, "Lift your hands, *amigo!*" Only his lips smiled. His eyes were agate-hard. And the gun was cocked. "No tricks," he added. "I am a nervous man with a gun!"

Jim didn't like the look in Luis Seguin's eyes. The *vaquero* could and would use a gun. Jim didn't like having his sixgun and rifle taken away, either, but there wasn't anything he could do about it—

"No tricks," he said. "I am a nervous man with the gun! Lift up your hands!"

then, during the night, when Luis slept with one eye open, or the next morning. All he could do was lead the outfit deep into the desolate basin beyond the Tablado Hills, a raw uplift of jagged rock.

OUTSIDERS might find a way into the Barrens but it took a man who had roamed that vast wasteland for a

long time to find his way safely in and out of it. Water-holes were few—and well hidden. There was scant forage for horses in the southern portion, though to the north, where the Big Tablados rose, there was timber and graze—and that was where the wild horses lived, animals that could travel the crags and rough canyon slopes like mountain goats. But Jodie Moore was not for the north hills.

"We'll head for Rustlers' Roost, Mingaloe," she said.

Jim gave her a frowning look. He didn't want to lead anybody to the old Mingaloe haunt and he didn't want to go there, himself.

"Why?" he demanded.

It was mid-day now, and they had broken camp at dawn. The outfit was already far into the basin. There was no trail. The rough terrain was dust and sand and rock; only Spanish cactus and catclaw and thorny brush grew in the waste. The hide-out that outsiders called Rustlers' Roost was still ten miles north in a hidden canyon.

Jim said again, "Why?"

"I may as well tell you, Mingaloe," the girl said. "The loot your crowd stole from the Trinity bank twelve years ago was never recovered. So far as anybody knows, it was hidden at Rustlers' Roost. A number of men have tried to find the cache—for themselves—during that time. Most of them were men from in and around Trinity. If any of them found the money, they never let it be known."

"I know all that," Jim said flatly. "You mean to say a girl like you is after that stolen money?"

"No; I'm not after it," Jodie replied. "But someone I know—someone I was very fond of—came here only three months ago to search. He had supplies for only a month. But he never came out of the Barrens. I want to know what happened to him—if he's alive or dead. I've got to know!"

Jim understood. He'd heard talk about a man named Bert Fowler having gone into the Barrens and not coming out; h 'd been told that Pat Moore of the Shamrock Ranch had sent half a dozen men of his crew into the *malpais* to make a search—without success. Fowler had been on the grub-line before hiring on at Shamrock as a bronc buster and there had been gossip for a time that Jodie Moore would marry him. Now Jim knew that the gossip hadn't been wrong. Jodie must have fallen in love with Fowler.

Jim stared at her.

"What made him go after that cache?"

"He heard stories about it. It was like bait to him."

"Didn't anybody warn him against this country?"

"Certainly. But he said he could go where the Mingaloes had gone."

Jim shook his head to that. There'd never been a man like Big Bart Mingaloe, in his capacity to live off the land. The outlaw had been able to do without water and food longer than other men; he had loved wild country. There'd been no Indian blood in him, yet he had been like an Apache—a son of the *malpais*. But he had ventured into the Barrens in the beginning, only under pressure from manhunters wearing law badges. And only luck had let him find a canyon with water and graze—and a short trail through the Big Tablados.

Jim almost pitied Jodie Moore, grasping at slim hope for the man she loved. "Don't build up your hopes," he told her. "I know this country—and it's a man killer. I would 't have a chance if I hadn't lived here with the Mingaloes."

"You think . . ." The girl's voice was a whisper. "—he's dead?"

He let her have it bluntly: "I'm sure of it."

By the middle of the afternoon the horses began to play out, worn down by heat and thirst, but the Big Tablados were looming just ahead—and Jim was moving straight for a water-hole.

They reached it two hours later, a tank hidden among jagged rocks. They drank, watered the horses. Jodie looked about the rocky uplifts, with uneasy eyes.

"How much farther to the Mingaloe hide-out?" she asked.

"We'll reach it in the morning," Jim told her.

His anger had long ago died, for he could hold no grudge against a girl on such a mission. He no longer resented Luis's having disarmed him. Tomorrow, anyway, he would be rid of them.

THE big log cabin still stood, needing only a new roof to make it as good a shelter as it had ever been. But the pole corrals Big Bart Mingaloe had built were down and the clearing was overgrown with brush and bunch grass. The canyon itself was still the same—cut through by a quick-running stream, and its walls sloping sharply upward with thin groves of pines above.

Jim's searching eyes saw the tracks of unshod hoofs in the dust, and so knew that mustang herds came here to graze and water.

But of Bert Fowler there was no sign, and disappointment lay heavy in Jodie Moore's eyes. Jim knew, then, that the girl had been hoping against hope that she would find the man here—alive.

Luis Seguin went into the cabin and came out shaking his head. The *vaquero* mounted again, prowled about the half-mile-long canyon. Jodie Moore remained in the saddle, her eyes downcast.

Jim had dismounted. He leaned against a drum-shaped boulder that stood midway between the cabin and the clearwater stream. He had lighted a quirly smoke and was thoughtful. He saw that he would rebuild the corrals and use this canyon for his base; he could round up the mustangs and bring them here for breaking. He'd make a gather of a dozen broomtails for a starter.

Luis came back, again shaking his head.

Jodie said, "Where was the loot hidden, Mingaloe?"

"I don't know," Jim told her. "Big Bart had a secret hiding-place for what money he got hold of. Called it his safe. But I don't think even Hank or Luke knew its whereabouts. That's the truth."

"You think Bert Fowler may have located it?"

"I'd gamble he didn't. I'm pretty sure he didn't even find this canyon," Jim said. "I'm convinced he died somewhere out on the Barrens."

"We'll make sure," the girl said. "Luis and I . . . You're free now to go about your own game." She studied him for a long moment. "You don't hold a grudge against me?"

"I suppose not."

"I'm glad," Jodie said. "Luis give Jim his sixgun and rifle."

That sundown a herd of wild horses came into the canyon to water, and when Luis and the girl returned from searching, Jim had a roan stallion roped and tied down. It had been a fight, catching that first mustang, and the rest of the herd had escaped, but Jim felt he'd made a start. He had already begun building a stout corral for his wild-eyed catch.

Jim said, "Any luck?" And even before Jodie said, "No," he knew what the answer was. They would find nothing—unless it would be the missing man's clean-picked bones.

That night Jodie cooked the supper, leaving Luis free to help Jim with his corral-building. The two men worked until she called, "Come and get it!" then, after eating, worked some more in the darkness. In the morning, Jodie again let Luis work on the corral. She did not take the *vaquero* out to search until the pen was built and the roan stallion was turned into it.

That day she found no sign of Bert Fowler. She had no better luck the next day, nor the next. Jim saw that she was despairing. He felt sorry for her. Despite himself, he liked Jodie Moore. He found himself looking forward to each evening when they would be back at camp. He also found that he had to tell himself not to grow too fond of her. He knew well enough that a girl like Jodie Moore was beyond the reach of a Mingaloe.

AT the end of the fourth day, there were five mustangs in the corral. They were animals that Jim was sure measured up to the British Army specifications. He and Luis built a second corral and, each evening between sundown

and dark, they worked at breaking the horses. It was tough work. The mustangs fought the halter, they fought the saddle, they fought the men. It was the evening of the sixth day when Jodie said, "It's no use. I'm quitting."

Jim gave her a startled look. He hadn't wanted her along in the beginning but he had grown accustomed to having her about. Now he didn't like the idea of having her leave. Jodie must have seen some feeling in his eyes for she smiled wryly.

"Luis can take me out across the Barrens," she said. "I promise to send him back to help you."

"I'm not worried about losing Luis."

"No? What, then?"

"It wasn't so bad, having you here, Jodie."

"Thanks for those kind words, Jim," she replied. "If all the Mingaloes were like you, they weren't too bad. But I'm only hindering you, so I'll leave in the morning. It was foolish of me to come here, wasn't it?"

"I guess it was, Jodie. You thought a lot of Bert Fowler?"

"Yes. But it was mostly one-sided," she said a little bitterly. "Bert never took me seriously. You see—" She broke off abruptly, listening tensely. "Did you hear something?"

Jim had heard something. So too had Luis, who came from the corrals. It had been a voice, an angry one, a man ripping out an oath. Yet the three people by the fire heard nothing more, strain to hear though they might. Luis said, "I'll look around," and drew his gun before moving off into the darkness.

Jim scattered the campfire and took up his rifle. The others were merely startled but he was caught up by real alarm. He knew that if someone had come into the hidden canyon, it was certainly the man Sheriff McCall had said was just released from twelve years in prison — Sam Loughran. Jim said, "Keep down, Jodie," and went after Luis.

He saw the *vaquero* moving carefully through the brush. He came up behind him, saying, "It's trouble, sure, Luis."

Then a burst of shots shattered the night quiet.

Luis gasped and tumbled down, lying very still. Jim had seen three gun flashes from a clump of mesquite, and he swung his rifle up and fired. He heard a commotion, men crashing back through the thicket, and then there was a heavy silence. No more shots came.

Jim crouched down, waited through an eternity of time, and finally a voice called, "Drop that rifle, you—or we'll plug the girl! We've got her covered!"

Jim didn't move.

A gunshot crashed behind him, over by the camp.

"You see?" yelled the hidden speaker. "The next shot'll get her!"

Jim threw down his rifle. He took his sixgun from his holster and shoved it into the waistband of his levis, around at his back, and pulled his leather brush jacket down over it. He unbuckled his cartridge belt and shoved it under a bush. Then he rose and lifted his hands.

Two men loomed, came at him through the darkness. One was Sam Loughran, gaunt now and pale-faced from prison and grown into a man of forty. The other was a small man; he had a wizened face that made Jim Mingaloe think of a half-spoiled apple. It was he who found and picked up Jim's rifle. "No sixgun?" he demanded, his voice rusty.

"Left it back at camp," Jim said, hoping they would not look for it when they went there. He kept eyeing Sam Loughran. "What's the idea, jumping us?"

"You three've been in our way!" the ex-convict growled. He was surly; bitterness edged his voice. "We watched you from the hills all day. I figured it was time to get rid of you!"

"You did a good job on my helper, Sam."

"And on you, too, if you don't watch your step. Big Bart's not here to side you now. He's dead and gone and rotting in hell—and that makes me top-dog of Rustlers' Roost. But I'm not holing up here."

"No?"

"Not if I get what I'm after!" Lough-

ran growled. He stared at Jim, hating him—hating the whole world. "Or maybe you've cleaned out Big Bart's cache?" he said, making a question of it.

"How could I, Sam? Nobody but Big Bart knew its location."

"I sure knew. And I've been waiting twelve years to get at it," the outlaw said, and now chuckled. "The law tried to make me squeal about it. But I played dumb like those two poor fools they hanged. They knew, too. Big Bart wasn't fooling none of us but you."

He gestured with his six-gun. "Walk back to your camp ahead of us."

JIM obeyed, feeling the hard bulk of his own sixgun tight against his back —and wondering if he'd get a chance to use it. A stocky young hardcase was standing over Jodie Moore and he said, "Sam, here's something surprising."

Lougnran eyed the girl and growled, "The hell with her! She's harmless. Build a fire, Jake." The stocky hardcase moved away. Loughran shot a look at the wizened little man. "Pete, you bring up the horses. I'll need the shovel I brought along."

Pete too went away, and Loughran, gun in hand, stood close guard over Jim and the girl. Jodie was sitting on her bedroll, calm-looking except for the fright in her eyes. Jake got the fire going and Pete came up with the horses. Loughran told them to watch Jim and the girl, then he took the shovel tied to the saddle of the horses. He went to the drum-shaped boulder that stood close to the abandoned cabin and began to dig into the ground at its base.

It took him a long time and he grunted with effort. Finally he began a wild cursing. He threw down the shovel and came to the fire, faced Jim and demanded, "Dammit! What'd you do with the loot?"

"Sam, I swear—"

Loughran's fist slammed into his face. The blow was terrific and unexpected and Jim went down. He started to pick himself up but Loughran's boot smashed into his ribs and downed him again. He stayed flat, full of pain and rage.

"I kept posted, even in the pen!" Loughran growled. "Nobody ever found Big Bart's cache. Nobody until now—so you got it! Where'd you move it to?"

"I tell you, I didn't know where it was cached!"

"You want to talk the hard way?"

Jake put in, "His woman'll know, Sam. She'll talk easier."

Loughran swung on Jodie. Helpless, Jodie protested she knew nothing about the loot. Jim slipped his right hand beneath him, worked it under his brush jacket and got hold of his sixgun.

He knew he couldn't face three guns and stay alive but it was Jodie he was thinking of when he heaved over from his back, lurched up to his knees and started shooting.

Quick as he was, Pete was quicker—with a hoarse yell and a shot that went wild. Jim's shot caught Pete in the chest and bowled him over backward; then, coming to his feet, Jim threw down on Sam Loughran.

The ex-convict's gun crashed along with Jim's, and Jim spun half around as Loughran's slug tore into him. He didn't fall but shock and pain held him paralyzed. He saw Loughran readying for another shot but he could do nothing about it. Loughran got his gun levelled, then he hadn't strength enough to squeeze the trigger. Jim's shot had hit him and now the life went out of Sam Loughran even while he stood upright. The gun dropped first, then the man.

Jim looked from the fallen Loughran to the other man. The girl was still struggling but her efforts only served to keep Jake from using his gun. His left hand held her in front of him. His right hand tried to bring his gun to bear on Jim.

"You're done for, Mingaloe!" Jake shouted. "Drop your gun!"

Jim managed to swing his gun up. "Get in the open, Jake!"

It wouldn't work. Jake had the best of it and knew it. He would hold the girl as a shield. In a panic, Jim knew that his strength was slipping away. But then he saw something behind Jake, something crawling painfully over the ground. It

was Luis, whom Jim had thought was dead. Luis, unable to stand, was crawling up with gun in hand. Luis had no dislike for shooting a man in the back. And Jim let him do it. Jim fell in a heap just as Luis' shot roared.

IN the next hour or two, Jodie did the best she could. She cleansed and, using a spare shirt she carried, bandaged Jim's wound. It was in his left side and he had smashed ribs. But the slug hadn't lodged in the wound, so it was not a dangerous injury. Luis however was worse off, with an ugly chest wound.

Despite his own weakness, Jim helped Jodie care for the *vaquero.* There was little they could do beyond stopping the bleeding. Luis needed expert medical care. And in the morning, help came.

Hoofs clattered. Riders swept into the canyon.

Jodie cried out joyously, for Sheriff Dan McCall rode at the head of a posse of Trinity townsmen. Doc Shannon was along, expecting to have work before the posse returned to town. This was, however, different from what he had anticipated. His patients were waiting him.

The medico worked on Luis first, and the possemen set out to bury the three dead outlaws. There were men in that crowd who had never had much use for Jim Mingaloe, but now, hearing the story from Jodie Moore, they seemed to forget that he had been raised by the wild Mingaloe clan.

McCall explained to Jim and Jodie that he had trailed Sam Loughran and his partners straight across the Barrens to the hidden canyon. "Never would have found this place, otherwise," he said. "Loughran was a fool. Big Bart would never have left a trail like he did. But then, Big Bart wouldn't have pulled a coldblooded murder. Loughran killed Mark Owens, shot him down on the street —for revenge. Loughran hadn't forgotten that the lawyer sent him to prison after promising to let him off. Why'd those three jump you folks, Jim?"

"They figured I'd taken Big Bart's loot."

"The bank money?" Sheriff McCall said. "Well, he was far wrong. It was found by that drifter, Bert Fowler. He must have been lucky enough to stumble into this hide-out for nobody could have told him how to get here. I got word yesterday that Fowler had been wounded in a gun-fight in Denver and he told the law officers there how he'd come by all the money he was carrying. The bank'll get a big part of its money back. Fowler was living a high life in the big town for a month but he died of that wound. And I guess it's good riddance."

The sheriff moved away to see how Doc Shannon was coming with Luis. Alone with Jodie Moore, Jim said, "I'm sorry. I guess it's bad news for you."

"I'd forgotten Bert Fowler in the past few days, Jim."

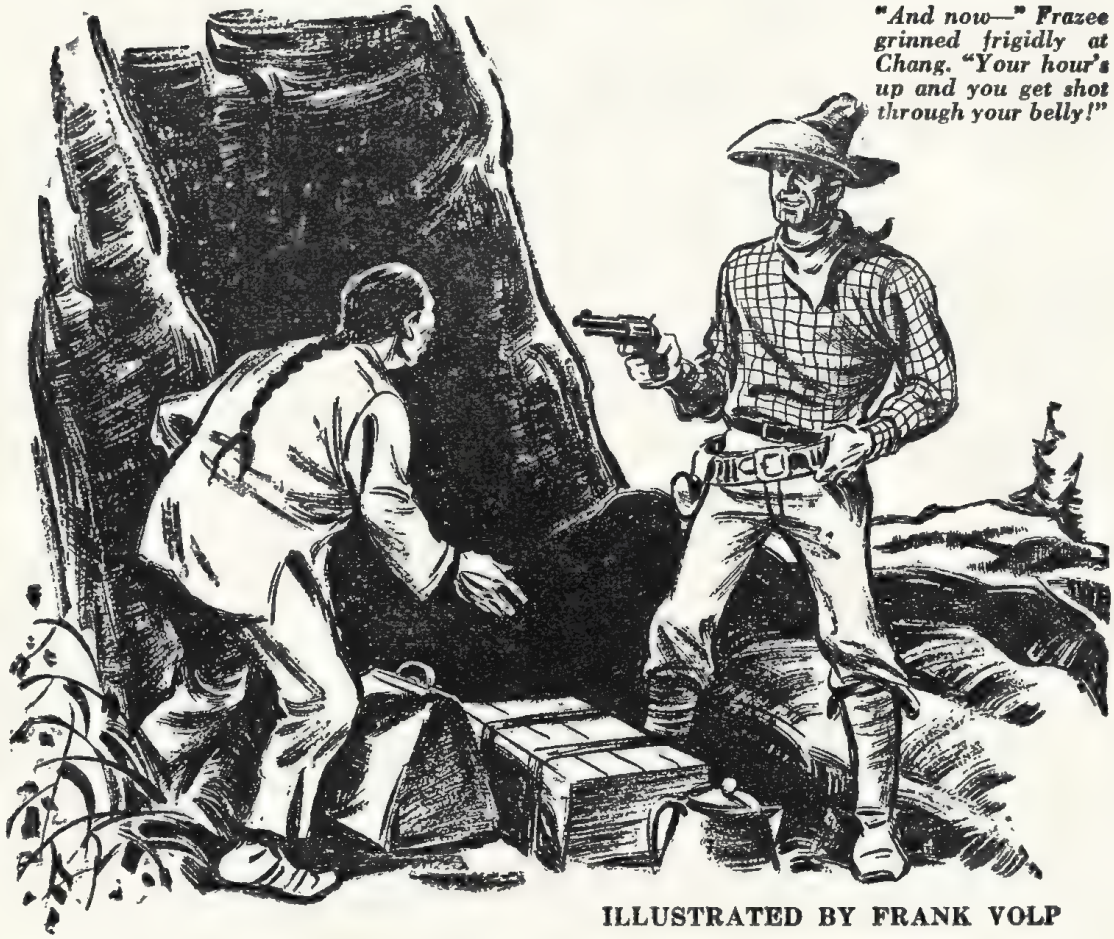
"That's best, Jodie."

She smiled at him, and there was in her smile in her eyes Jim Mingaloe's first understanding of why she had forgotten the man who had been killed in Denver. It wouldn't matter to Jodie Moore that the name she planned to take as her own had an outlaw taint. Jim saw his whole future in her smile and there was more to it than the hunting of wild horses.

SURE! THAT'S WHAT WE SAID:

LEADING WESTERN

LAST VICTIM



"And now—" Frazee grinned frigidly at Chang. "Your hour's up and you get shot through your belly!"

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK VOLP

By ART KERCHEVAL

There was no way for Chang to melt this madman's rage so the little man from the Orient waited for the gun-roar to shatter the mountain stillness and his very simple helpless existence

CHANG WUNG stood uncertainly by his noonday fire, there at the foot of rugged, ore-rich Scar Mountain, letting the bacon burn black. At the same time he watched big, dirty, gun-hung Durk Frazee ride down the rocky trail from the mine.

There was no sign of Fitch Starbuck, and the spick-and-span Little Chinaman felt apprehension crawl along his stomach. The two men always came down together and now Frazee was alone.

Frazee rode into the camp and swung down. Chang who took an almost fanatic pride in his own cleanliness by washing his clothes and his person every day, could scarcely conceal his dislike for this man, with the sweaty smell of his unwashed body and his soiled shirt that had never touched water. But today Chang was seeing more—an evil shine in the man's eyes; he watched Frazee come forward and something in the set of that dark-skinned face caused fear

to churn deep inside Chang.

The slant-eyed Oriental took a step back and said shakily, "Where Mista Fitch?"

Frazee grinned coldly and spat. "Fitch ain't comin' back," he said darkly.

Chang swallowed hard and licked his dry lips. He had a pretty good idea what had happened to old Fitch. Chang began to edge away, his dread mounting. "You —you kill him?" he quavered.

Frazee patted the butt of his colt, his lips thin and warped. "Don't try to sneak off, you slant-eyed heathen, or I'll let you have it right now—just like I did Fitch!"

Chang stopped, fighting hard to still the trembling in his legs. "But why," he asked, even though he felt he knew, "you do this?"

The big man reached down, picked up a piece of the bacon, without taking his eyes off Chang. "You and Fitch were a couple of damn fools, thinkin' I'd share that gold. We've taken out enough to set a man up for life, so a little while ago I slammed a pick across the old cuss's head. And now soon's I take care of you, I'll be on my way to town."

Chang shifted his sandled feet, feeling awfully small and helpless before the hulking Frazee. He regretted the day he'd entered into the three-way partnership. But it had sounded like a good proposition, two months ago, when he had come drifting into the near-by town of Red Sands, seeking peace in this new land far from the tong wars of San Francisco.

In a saloon he had met Fitch Starbuck, an old prospector who had found a trace of gold on Scar Mountain and had acquired a partner, Durk Frazee, to help him work the claim. Chang had begged the old man to let him come along. Dreams of gold had filled his mind—for gold meant that the little hand laundry he'd always wanted would become a reality.

Chang's heart hammered against his ribs. It was hot there at the base of the mountain but there was a cold sweat on his yellow skin. Then he got a grip on himself and a spark of anger glowed in his eyes. "Mista Fitch velly good man," he said, trying to keep his voice even. "You bite hand that feed you."

Frazee's eyes narrowed and he said harshly, "Don't give me any of your lip, Chink! Get busy and pack up my things."

Chang's mouth tightened a little. His immaculate trimmed fingernails cut into the palms of his hands. It was the same old story, Frazee shoving and kicking him around. He recalled that this slab-shaped man with the evil-looking grin had always treated him with contempt, too free with boot and fist. Frazee, with the filthy body—with the shirt that hadn't touched water! Chang couldn't understand how he'd wormed himself into Fitch's confidence.

But to hesitate would bring death more quickly, the little Oriental realized, so he began to gather Frazee's odds and ends.

FRAZEE towered over him, hand close to gun, while Chang finished packing. Chang could feel the gloating mood behind the grimy face. "Got plenty of gold!" Chang heard him chuckling thinly to himself. "So maybe that Honey hellcat'll see things my way."

That was another thing, Chang thought—Honey Cage. It seemed almost funny, the way Frazee talked so much about Honey Cage, the star-eyed little dancer in Red Sands, and how he'd make her sit up and take notice when he returned triumphant, laden with gold to Red Sands. Chang, who'd seen the girl a few times, felt sure she never lost any sleep over the unhandsome, dirty-shirted Durk Frazee.

Death would lance out at any time now. Chang slowly rose, realizing his usefulness to the killer was about at an end. Yet the tight lipped little Chinaman almost forgot his fear for himself, thinking that Frazee was a sorry sight indeed to be seeking the favor of the fair sex. Gold, he knew, would never make up for the man's lack of pride in himself. He

needed a bath and a shave. He needed a clean shirt!

It bothered Chang—that shirt. It bothered him a great deal. Chang, who placed pride in cleanliness above almost all things. And suddenly Chang knew, even if he was going to die, he had to wash that shirt!

"Shlirt smell like pestered polecat," Chang ventured, clearing his throat and marvelling that he could still speak. "Velly bad for conduct love affair!"

To Chang's surprise, Frazee gravely mulled over the matter, scratching his bristly chin. Chang saw him nod quickly, a crooked smile bending his lips. "By damn, you're right at that!" came his thoughtful grunt. "Sure as hell have gotta be spruced up, don't I? You've won yourself a few more minutes of livin', Chink. Get out your laundry tubs. Gonna have a clean courtin' shirt!"

A FEW minutes later, Chang knew he'd started something that, if word got around, would make hilarious history in Red Sands. Frazee was actually taking a bath in the near-by spring, using a bar of Chang's laundry soap. His boots, pants and gun lay within the ugly man's reach.

Close by, Chang labored over a washboard, removing more than two months' accumulation of sweat and grime from Frazee's offending shirt. Wherever he went in his roamings, Chang always carried means to do his personal laundry. The equipment rode in his rickety old wagon.

With that deft touch women envied, Chang washed and rinsed the shirt and wrung it almost dry. Covertly, he watched the bathing man and wondered if he, Chang, could make a lunge for the gun. If only Frazee would get some of that strong soap in his eyes! But, as ever, Frazee never relaxed vigilance. That Colt would be in Frazee's hand, flaming and roaring, before Chang could get into action.

Finished with his bath, Frazee put on pants and boots and, gun riding in holster, waited for his shirt. Chang was just through shaking it out. Pride in a job well done, even if for the man who would soon send him to his honorable ancestors! Pride. Frazee couldn't take that away from him. He held up the shirt for Frazee's inspection.

"Shlirt all clean, Mista Durk," Chang announced. "Now huntee flat place in sun and splead out shlirt. Dly plenty quick."

Frazee smacked his gun butt. "See that it does!" he ground out. "I'm leavin' the mountain in an hour!"

One hour! Once more fear visited him and Chang had the strange feeling his queue was standing upright. He realized that, sometime during those fast-ticking sixty minutes, Frazee would drag his gun from holster, claiming Chang for his last victim.

Nerves going taut, the Oriental

(Continued on page 89)

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Last Victim

(Continued from page 87)

scanned his surroundings for a flat surface, where the sun's rays would give their fullest. A few feet to his right, he saw a slab of ruddy sandstone that suited his purpose. Of a sudden, Chang winced and stepped back.

He started forward again, toward that slab of rock, stopped in midstride and looked down. Abruptly he stiffened in his tracks, his oblique eyes growing a little wide and thoughtful.

If it worked, Chang told himself, he would live, to wash shirts again. Maybe he'd have that little laundry in Red Sands. Durk Frazee would pay, the hard way, for killing Fitch Starbuck. Even if it failed, it was Chang's only chance! He would die, anyway!

Spurred by these thoughts, steeling his jumpy nerves. Chang knelt, spread out the shirt, buttonside down. Not on the distant rock—but on a hot mound of sand. Then he stepped back, waited.

"All right, Chink!" Frazee snapped. "It'll dry without you watchin'! Get busy and dig your grave!" He laughed shortly. "A'ready buried Starbuck, where the lawdogs'll never get hep. Even if they do find your wagon, so what? Takes a corpse before a lawman can pin a killing'!"

FRAZEE, contempt in the twist of his mouth, tossed Chang a shovel. But Chang didn't pick it up. All the little things that had been boiling inside him were now crowding to the surface. For the first time, Chang Wung stood his ground, eyes kindling.

"Chang's patience has waned," he said. "He not wish to dig own humble grave."

Frazee took a step toward him, hand clapping gun, on the verge of drawing it. "Oh, you don't like the idea? I'm sayin', pick up that shovel! You savvy, Chink?"

"Me savvy," Chang said evenly, strangely unperturbed. "Shlirt maybe dly now. You tly it on."

With haste, as if it were something

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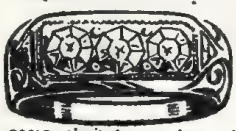

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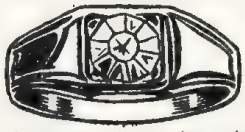

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too hot to handle, Chang picked up the shirt. Mouthing an impatient oath, then, Frazee grabbed it out of his hands. The big killer didn't take his eyes off Chang as he slipped into the shirt.

"And now—" Frazee grinned frigidly. "—your hour is up, Chink."

Chang stood rooted, there at the foot of the mountain, unaware that a molten sun was beating down. Almost without emotion, he watched Frazee's gun leave its holster. Frazee's grin, nearly a frozen expression, remained on his twisted mouth, while his trigger finger tightened. Face to face with death, Chang found suddenly to his awe that he could meet it manfully. Death that would come too soon for his wild plan to work!

It happened with startling abruptness. Chang heard Frazee's frantic howl, saw him slap the back of his neck with his free hand. Next moment, the big fellow was cursing violently.

In a frenzy of rage Frazee squeezed the trigger and gun-roar shattered the mountain stillness. But, thanks to a lot of hellish little things that spoiled his aim, the bullet went wide of Chang. In the same instant Chang ducked low—came up with his washboard in his hands. With all the might of a man twice his size, he brought it crashing down on Frazee's skull before Frazee could fire again.

"Mista Durk, you fall plenty asleep at switch!" Chang murmured, as though Frazee could hear. "Not watch when you put on shlirt. Inside all fulla velly mad little ants!" He sighed sagely. "Idea come quick when one ant bite Chang on leg. Insplire Chang to splead shlirt on ant-hill. Chang all same velly satisfied."

Hours afterward, Chang tooled his rickety wagon into the gold sunset, his washboard weapon handy beside him. Atop his load, he'd found room for a securely trussed and gagged Durk Frazee, who would hang, some bright dawn, in Red Sands. Before long, now, a proud Chang would have his little laundry in the town, where there was a crying need for shirts cleaned the Chang Wung way.

Survivor from the Stone Age

By WILL NICHOLS

ONE day in 1908, a party of surveyors were working along Deer Creek, a short distance east of the Sacramento River in southern Tehama County, California. It was rough going through the tangled wilderness, in scenes unchanged from centuries past. Suddenly, they stumbled upon a clearing—and there before their startled eyes was a picture indeed out of the long ago. Poised on a boulder by the bank, a double-pronged fish-spear raised high, was a bronzed, naked man. Almost the instant they caught sight of him, he was aware of their presence. He lifted his black, beady eyes to them for a moment, whirled, and disappeared like a ghost into the forest.

Back at camp that night, the camp cook, who knew the region well, laughed at their story. There hadn't been an Indian in the territory for years—all had either been killed off or sent to distant reservations decades ago.

But the next morning, as the surveyors forced a way through the underbrush and fallen trees, an arrow came winging out of nowhere to whirr within a foot of the head of the leading surveyor and crash against a rock.

Nervously, the party examined the arrow. It had a stone head, and was of the type used by Indians a century in the past. After a brief pause, the surveyors cautiously advanced.

In a few minutes, they came upon a small camp in a clearing. An old Indian man and a middle-aged Indian woman crawled rapidly away through the brush. The party made no attempt to stop them. Then, under a pile of rabbit skins, they found an ancient Indian woman, almost paralyzed with fright. She made guttural sounds and pointed to her mouth, and they lifted her to a sitting position and gave her some water. They seized a num-

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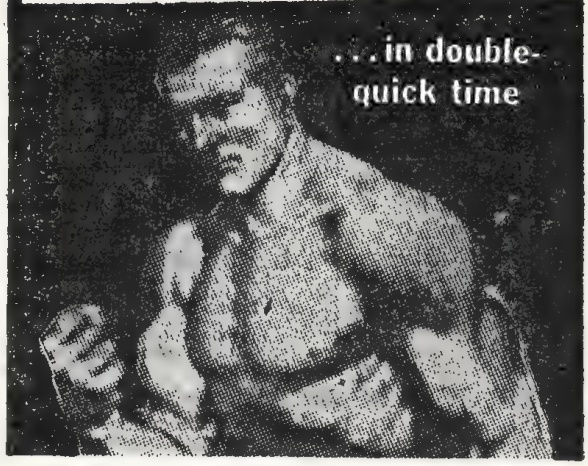

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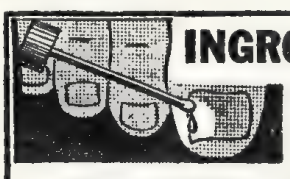

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ber of arrows, blankets, and crude cooking utensils as souvenirs and leaving the old woman a canteen of water, continued on.

The next day, having qualms of conscience, the surveyors returned to the camp to offer recompense for what they had gone off with. They found the site deserted.

Weeks later, University of California anthropologists, hearing the story, went eagerly to the scene and made a wide search of the district for the four Indians. They could find no trace.

THREE years went by. Early one morning, in August, 1911, the butchers at a slaughterhouse outside of Oroville were aroused by the barking of their shepherd dogs at the corral. They looked out to see a strange sight. Huddled in the corral, surrounded by snarling dogs, was an emaciated Indian man, his only clothing a cape of rabbit furs slung loosely about his bony shoulders. He had no weapon and gestured feebly at the dogs, calling out at them shrilly.

The butchers rescued him from the dogs. In response to their questions, the man spoke only gibberish. At length, the butchers called the sheriff of Butte County to tell him that they had a wild man to cope with. The sheriff came right over and in turn could make nothing of the peculiar being. Concluding that he was at least harmless, the sheriff covered him with a butcher's apron and took him in handcuffs to the jail.

There everyone in Oroville who had any knowledge of Indian languages tried to no avail to get sense out of the terrified stranger. Though he was obviously in a bad way from hunger, he took no notice of the offers of food, merely huddling in his cell and darting apprehensive glances about at his captors.

Reports of "the wild man of Oroville" appeared in the newspapers. Dr. T. T. Waterman of the University of California Department of Anthropology was immediately interested. The man, he had a hunch, was a Yahi—a member of a tribe of primitive Indians supposedly long ago wiped out. Equipped with a long list of

Indian words from the Department's extensive language file, Dr. Waterman came over to Oroville to see the creature.

Dr. Waterman tried word after word. The Indian made no response, but just stared vacantly into space. Finally, when the list was almost exhausted, the anthropologist came to the word "si-min-i," meaning yellow pine. He pointed to the frame of the cot on which the prisoner was crouched and pronounced the word as carefully as he could. At once a great light broke on the Indian's face. He nodded his head excitedly. "Si-min-i!" he said rapturously, and repeated it over and over.

That did it. In a short time, Dr. Waterman had succeeded in gathering from the now eagerly cooperative Indian that he was indeed a Yahi—a Stone Age man who had survived into the present century! His name was Ishi—which meant, "I am a man." It was he whom the surveyors had seen about to spear a fish. His companions were all dead.

Ishi now ate ravenously of the food offered him, and Dr. Waterman made arrangements for his release. He was given an outfit of clothing and was taken by Dr. Waterman, to whom he now clung with the loyalty of a dog who has found a master, to the University of California.

THOUGH the middle-aged Indian had lived all his life near the modern world, he knew no more of it than would a Stone Age man—which indeed he was. He had seen trains at a distance, but they were to him frightening monsters. He whimpered and hid behind his newfound friend when he first saw a train up close at the station. But swiftly he took to the miracles of this new world as things to be wondered at but to be accepted as the white man's magic.

At the University, he was given a room in the Museum of Anthropology—which he always kept in perfect order—and given a lifetime appointment as an assistant janitor, with a salary of twenty-five dollars a month. He wore the clothes of civilization without question—although he hated the shoes. He soon learned a

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vocabulary of several hundred English words—among them a number of slang terms he picked up from children who visited the museum.

His reactions were not always predictable. Electric lights seemed to cause him little amazement, evidently being, like streetcars and automobiles, so far beyond his comprehension as to be hardly worth trying to figure out. But matches were a constant source of delight to him, as was running water from a faucet. The most wonderful thing to him was the number of people to be seen in San Francisco. He would stand for hours on Market Street as the host of human beings flowed by him, and he could hardly be persuaded to leave the astonishing spectacle. When he first saw a window shade, he tried to lift it. It fell back. He tried to push it aside. No good. Dr. Waterman demonstrated how, given a slight jerk, it would roll itself up.

Ishi was still trying an hour later to solve to his satisfaction the puzzle of where the shade had disappeared to.

Ishi was a fine character, kind, eager to please, dignified, and observant. When shown how to do something, he demonstrated ready aptitude to follow instructions. Using table silver was no problem to him: he watched others handling the utensils for a few moments, and then used them easily.

From Ishi, the anthropologists learned vastly more of the Yahi language and all that is known of the otherwise lost Yahi culture.

He lived less than five years in the modern world. He had contracted tuberculosis some time before he was found in that slaughterhouse corral, and on March 25, 1916, the last North American Stone Age man, despite all that medical science could do, passed into history, and the Yahis became an extinct people. But Ishi had saved their culture from oblivion.

And Ishi was buried with all the ceremony that Yahi culture demanded, his bows and arrows beside him, bowls of food close at hand to sustain him on the long journey to rejoin his ancestors—to whom he would indeed tell many a tale.

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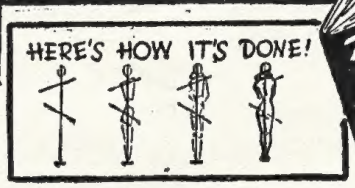

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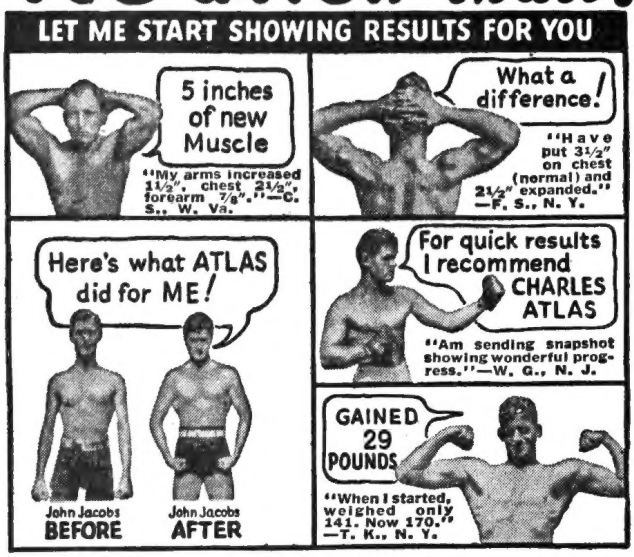
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